DONALD McRAE

NOTHING PERSONAL

THE BUSINESS OF SEX

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NOTHING PERSONAL

Prostitution is considered to be the oldest profession in the world; yet to be caught either selling or paying for sex is considered to be demeaning. These suppositions of guilt are strongly challenged by Donald McRae in NOTHING PERSONAL. With unprecedented access to the stories of prostitutes of both sexes, their pimps, and their clients, McRae reveals the intimacies that take place at this most private of exchanges. He turns the spotlight onto previously hidden areas – who is motivated into using the services of a gigolo, or a whip-wielding dominatrix? – and explores, with sympathy, the plight of women – and men – routinely exposed to danger, with little or no protection from the law. This is a personal guide to the business of sex.

About the author

Donald McRae was born in Germiston, South Africa, in 1961. Between 1981 and 1984 he edited and wrote for two independent Johannesburg magazines while also teaching English literature in Soweto. Since the middle of 1984 he has lived in London – where he has written about South Africa, music, films, books and boxing for numerous national newspapers and magazines in Europe, America and Africa. *Nothing Personal* is his first book.

Nothing Personal
The Business of Sex

Donald McRae

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For Kath

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Preface

In March 1990, I was asked to write the biography of a London prostitute. She had been written about in the 'quality' newspapers as a woman of both strangeness and substance and was reputed to have been working for some time on the idea of a book. My first reaction on hearing this proposal was to laugh, as I felt certain that some mistake must have been made. I was then writing mostly about South Africa, my home country, and the idea of switching to a subject like prostitution, of which I could then claim to know not much more than the next person, seemed absurd.

However, I was persuaded that I was capable of writing such a book because of my previous experiences in South Africa, where I had occasionally interviewed 'banned' or 'wanted' people in Soweto. The ensuing logic, presumably, was that I would have little difficulty in engaging in meaningful dialogue with a similarly controversial 'refugee' from polite sexual norms in suburban London. Yet I still felt acutely conscious of my relatively limited knowledge of prostitution and uncomfortable with the idea of writing a biography of a living person. I imagined myself being pulled apart by my own ignorance and the compromise which is embedded in the writing of another's personal history as they peer over your shoulder. So I declined that offer with as much grace as I could muster beneath the bewilderment I still felt at having even been approached.

The subject would then have been closed if it had not been for my own aroused curiosity. As becomes clear some way into the first chapter of *Nothing Personal*, a variety of

circumstances opened the way for the emergence of an altogether different kind of book. Most of all, I was extremely fortunate to meet Alice Teague and Mandy Kavanagh in those first weeks when I began to seriously consider writing about the wider arena of prostitution. Their initial impact on this book was considerable – not only in the way in which they shattered my preconceptions about the subject but also because they introduced me to the darker areas of prostitution with unusual wit. They pointed out similarly that, at the crossroads of marriage and the marketplace, prostitution blurs the boundaries between the personal and the public so that money is brought into the bedroom and sex is sold on the streets. Prostitution's complex conflicts also accentuate the more subtle power struggles inherent to all relationships and Mandy and Alice, from the outset, were emphatic in the belief that empowering prostitutes empowers all women.

But they helped most of all by constantly reaffirming the need for me to move beyond the confines of their more intellectually rigorous domain. It was imperative for a coherent understanding of prostitution, they stressed, that I ventured into the more representative, if also more distressing, backrooms and streets.

They both expressed bitter regret when my increasingly wayward journey into the furthest corners of prostitution culminated with my ending up in hospital one night. That had been the seventh time I had been physically attacked during the eighteen months of my writing about prostitution and it felt then, momentarily at least, that I would be lucky to be allowed another two lives. To Alice and, in particular, Mandy, whose one client was responsible for that openly declared 'season of violence', it felt as if they were personally liable for the trouble in which I had landed. But I knew then that I was not being especially persecuted. In the context of prostitution, such violence is not strange. Neither is the fear nor the pain which that brutality inevitably brings.

Alice and Mandy eventually had to concede the point that they had always made to me; far from being the ones responsible for the often ominous backdrop against which they work, the prostitutes in this country are pinned to the wall not only by physical assailants but by the hypocritical iniquities of the law. It would be laughable if it were not so damaging that prostitution has still not been decriminalized in Britain. Instead, we have to deal with the ludicrous situation where actual prostitution is not illegal; rather, the *advertizing* of the act constitutes a crime, which is a curious anomaly to be applied to a billion-pound industry by a capitalistic legal system. This also results in the widespread confusion surrounding the discrepancy between legalization and decriminalization. Prostitutes are not calling for the legalization of their trade, for such a change is less innocuous than it sounds. Under legalization, the State assumes the role of an all-controlling pimp with often disastrous consequences for the prostitutes themselves. In Austria, where prostitution has been legalized, sex workers operate under an insidious kind of house-arrest system in which they have to report to the police whenever they take 'extended leave' of the area to which they are consigned. In Switzerland, women who decide to abandon their careers as prostitutes are not allowed to legally find alternative forms of work until they are in receipt of a 'good girl' letter from the police. To obtain such an official statement, the ex-prostitute has to prove herself to be a 'good girl' for three years. In Germany, prostitutes pay an exorbitant 56% tax rate and yet are not eligible for the social benefits available to the 'ordinary' citizen.

Even more disturbing in Britain is the judicial whim which sometimes appears to consider that a prostitute living in the same house as her lover is a more serious offence than rape. This is yet another consequence of the fact that Britain's business of sex is regulated within the confines of criminal rather than commercial law. This constraint means that the

State effectively considers prostitutes to be 'guilty' of a crime.

From a similar perspective, Peter Sutcliffe's 'Yorkshire Ripper' murder of thirteen women in the late 1970s was apparently driven by a divine mission to rid the Earth of the 'guilty scum' who walked the streets. Sutcliffe claimed that he could tell that prostitutes were not 'innocent' just by observing the way in which they walked. Just as Sir Michael Havers, the Attorney General, declared that the saddest part of the Ripper case was that some of Sutcliffe's victims were not prostitutes, so the Yorkshire police ran a 'the next victim may be *innocent*' poster campaign after five prostitutes had already been murdered.

As long as prostitution is a criminal offence then this presumed guilt will continue to be a given and prostitutes' lives will still be considered to be 'worth' less than others. I soon learnt that when a prostitute is a victim of violence it continues to be presumed in some quarters that 'she was asking for it . . .' This attitude is degrading not only to the prostitute but to all women.

So when those bad and violent moments came to me, any maudlin pleasure I searched for in self-pity was truncated by the store of memories I had already built up in talking to more than three hundred people involved in prostitution. If I had to find some sustenance in order to complete this book I did not have to look far, for I had witnessed much resilience and creativity from others during our interviews. Moreover, I also probably laughed more in those eighteen months than I had ever done. When all that was remembered, it was not especially difficult to continue.

And in truth, beyond my personal concern, nothing of lasting consequence occurred in those various assaults against me. They were but a pinprick when set against the severe ramifications of the political and legal establishments' reluctance to confront the fact that arresting streetwalkers night after night and breaking-up 'brothels' is not going to

wash away prostitution and its endemic problems of violence and exploitation.

From the penthouses to the tower blocks, from telephone booths to suburban backstreets, prostitution is now so consuming that it shadows every facet of this society. It could be argued that such an expansive sex-for-cash spectrum has always prevailed; but against the backdrop of an enduring economic crisis, the concentration of prostitution has never before run so deep or with such drastic urgency.

Yet I was drawn deep into this subject less by failings in the law than by the very people involved in prostitution. Their extraordinary stories, often related here in their own eloquent and incisive words, present an informed platform for the change that is needed, the change that would finally drag the sex business out of the furtive and damaging world it all too often inhabits.

The lucidity of those featured in this book allowed me to use a significant percentage of the words I recorded during the many hours we spent together. However, my initial desire to keep myself out of these pages was refuted by the prostitutes themselves. They claimed that this book was different from others written about prostitution in the sense that, through a combination of chance and specific personal interests, I was able to meet and get to know such a diverse mix of people – covering virtually every conceivable form of prostitution – both rich and poor, exclusive and pedestrian, male and female, gay and straight. Ironically my South African-ness, or my comparative classlessness in British terms of accent and school education, helped enormously for I found myself able to drift in and out of the disparate strata of prostitution with relative ease. Apart from a few isolated individuals I was invariably welcomed and was the recipient of much kindness and patience when, really, those attributes should have been travelling in the opposite direction.

The structure of the book, like the style of its writing,

also underwent numerous changes. At first, in my strictly objective phase, I was planning to write a series of virtual 'case studies'. Without the necessary sociological acumen I soon abandoned this technique for a more open exploration of four distinct spheres of prostitution – namely, 'high-class' prostitutes and gigolos who mostly work alone; Soho, that traditional but now significantly altered area of prostitution; escort agencies; and street sex. While they make for convenient divisions, these barriers are easily blurred with both prostitutes and their clients sometimes moving from one sex-zone to another. So, finally, I settled on this hopefully more fluid, if sometimes amorphous, version where my experiences of prostitution are recounted as a journey, in the chronological order in which they unfolded.

Owing to my earlier intention, the book can still be read in terms of the different worlds comprising British prostitution – in broad terms, the first five chapters are set at the very top of the prostitution tree, with people who have enjoyed both impressive educational opportunities and backgrounds of relative economic stability, and sometimes extreme wealth; chapters six to eight are set in Soho; the following two are devoted to contrasting escort agencies; chapters eleven to fifteen are mostly out on the street. I was particularly interested in the fact that these worlds are not enclosed – not only do they echo the same themes but, also, they often include the same people. Inevitably, some of the protagonists move from one chapter to the next, from one section to another.

Lastly, on the crucial question of personal identity, one of my prime objectives in writing this book was to interview the clients and entrepreneurs involved in prostitution. Because of society's prevailing attitude to the commercial consumption of sex, such people, particularly the clients, are loath to have their private prostitution practices made public. Consequently, I have changed the names of those people who requested this before agreeing to be interviewed.

Mindful of this prevailing anonymity and accompanying sense of the unknown, I also resolved not to write about prostitutes such as Lindi St Clair and Helen Buckingham as their stories and views on prostitution have already been well documented. They are the exceptions to the rule which, perhaps up until now, has always preferred to cloak prostitution in secrecy. To all those in this book who chose to break that more typical silence I offer a heartfelt 'thank-you'.

Chapter One

The Terminator Angel

As usual, his finger pressed against her doorbell at exactly three o'clock. Mandy Kavanagh felt certain she would only find a more accurate measure of time on a Tuesday afternoon by dialling the Speaking Clock. Moreover, Alistair's metronomic arrival at her home in South Kensington every week had the same despairing effect on her as that digitalised voice.

For the first eighteen months of their 'dark tryst of pain', as he described their relationship, she had been fascinated by this precision. She used to watch him from the wide bay-window in her blue room as he turned the corner of her tree-lined street at exactly two minutes to the hour. That was all the time he needed to walk past the thirty houses before reaching her front steps.

The meticulous strangeness of his obsession with time was not unlike that which shadowed her own life. Since the age of nineteen, twelve years ago, she had also framed her darker desires within specific compartments of time. But where Mandy thought in blocks of years, Alistair's life was ordered by the hour. He kept track of the minute hand on his gold Rolex by means of a small alarm which drove her mad when it beep-beeped every quarter-hour to help maintain his intricate schedule of appointments.

As his austere 'Terminator Angel', one of the rare pleasures of her time with him was to remove that chirruping watch as soon as they got down to business. This shifted

the balance of power in her direction. But, even as she humiliated him, Mandy could never forget that Alistair dictated the course of his own degradation. She also could not fool herself into thinking that this transfer of authority was anything more than a temporary manoeuvre, a kink in his otherwise impregnable psyche.

Time never flew when Mandy was with Alistair. Instead, the minutes between three and four dragged. It was not only the actual time she spent with him that was so consuming. The hours preceding and following his every visit left a trail of slime down her day. She had learnt the long way that this slippery feel of dirt did not become easier to bear with repetition.

Every week was the same, even though he was different from her other fantasists. Where they locked themselves into their adjusted personae as soon as she led them into the bedroom, Alistair always took his time. There was something eerily measured about the way he abandoned one self for another. It seemed as if he was trying to control his own fleeting renunciation of power.

More importantly, as she leaned back against her wardrobe watching him, Alistair wanted to impress Mandy. To him, she was an incredibly bright, beautiful woman. Although nearly twenty years younger than him she exuded a self-assurance he rarely encountered. For when they were together Mandy seldom allowed any emotion to cross her face, even when he dropped into his jagged whisper that she should 'call me cunt, call me cunt'. And so, as if she was reading out a familiar share price on the Dow Jones Index, she repeated the word in her cool newscaster's voice. This unyielding professionalism only made him more determined to chip some way into her heart.

He would spend the first ten minutes in her cream bedroom, slowly undressing while he spoke of his success in the City that past week. Each item of clothing duplicated a decisive anecdote of achievement. It had always been this way – him talking, her listening – with Alistair never able

to fathom the extent of the impression he made on Mandy Kavanagh.

He had been a client of hers from the start of the golden years of his career, an apex of accomplishment which Alistair claimed to scale a little higher every week. When she first met him he had just fought his way on to the board of a nationwide bank after years of transforming ailing financial institutions into money-spinning corporations. Other prestigious board positions had since followed, for Alistair's talent, or 'genius' as he put it, lay in money; in manipulating it around the marketplace. The clarity of his success stemmed from the strict correlation he made between power and money. He used one to strengthen the other.

Having shared his business week with Mandy he would stand naked before her. She would continue to appraise him silently, barely concealing her disapproval. This, in one of the many ironies of her work, meant that she was already doing her job. He'd talk on, letting loose some of the secrets he had stored for himself since the previous Tuesday. Almost always, these stories involved a young girl who would be trampled beneath him.

She would start out as a real person in a position of hackneyed subservience – a secretary in his company's head office or a young air hostess on his most recent Concorde flight – and he would describe how she looked, how she moved and how she made him feel when he watched her. He would evoke for Mandy the smoothness of the girl's skin, the sheen of life radiating from her. He imagined her sweet smile twisting into a pout, then into a wet open mouth begging him to shower his moneyed power over her, to favour her over the rest.

Then his desire became entwined with anger. The girl would be reduced to his idea of a money-grabbing 'everywhore'. He breathed the word out softly while Mandy turned away and led him down the narrow stairway leading to the cellar. All the way down those eleven stairs

'everywhore' would follow her, a refrain as sour as his breath was sweet with minted chocolate.

At the bottom of the wooden stairway he would be on his hands and knees, crawling towards the leather and metal apparatus. He felt himself being peeled open and pinned to the black convex couch 'like a mounted butterfly', with Mandy, his 'forbidding Mandy', his very own real life whore, swinging her studded leather belt fast through the air so that he could hear the thick swish just before he felt the pain. She rarely said anything while lashing into him, preferring instead to draw breath to fan her own hurt.

She knew that to fling wounding words at him only deepened the pleasure of his debasement. Despite the £250 he paid her to play the part of 'The Terminator Angel', an avenging 'everywhore', she did not act as she did with the others. They came to her cellar for more symbolic gestures of surrender and punishment – even the sound made by the belt was often enough to fill them with regret. But, where she pitied them, she despised Alistair. For him, she wanted her black ribbon of retribution to cause suffering rather than release.

Alistair was beyond redemption and, as bleak as he made her feel every Tuesday, this thought forced Mandy on with him. Her reasons for choosing prostitution were intensely personal; but wider social issues loomed over her encounters with Alistair. He was indisputably a powerful man, a man with the capacity to devastate the lives of other people. She was 'the only one', he said, who curbed his lust for power.

Yet Mandy could never claim, like some more golden-hearted prostitutes, that she was in this business for the well-being of her clients. She took limited pride in the service she offered, despite her men's avowal of its excellence. Prostitution was merely the track she had chosen to follow for five years. Mandy often wondered what Alistair might do if he no longer had recourse to their Tuesday afternoon sessions; so she had resolved that as long as she worked as

a prostitute she would maintain their 'tryst', despite his depravity.

But when she heard the first ring of the bell on that Tuesday, a heavier kind of dread drew across her heart. Mandy stayed a little longer in the blue room, rocking gently as she always did when she sat in her high-backed wicker chair. She knew that he would ring again more insistently, as he was already doing, whether or not she raced from her room, down the stairs and along the black and white hall to answer his call as soon as she heard him.

Lately, Mandy lingered before letting him into her home. In the past it had never been for more than a minute or two but on this afternoon, after nearly four years of such arrivals at her door, she continued to let him wait. At five past three, as his ringing hit a declamatory pitch, she finally rose with a sigh and closed the door behind her, still uncertain why the thought of seeing Alistair that day ground her down in a way she had never known.

She dallied down the sumptuously carpeted stairs, wondering if maybe she should end it and not open the door. What would he do then? Where would he go if not to her cellar? Perhaps he himself imagined these questions for his finger appeared glued to her buzzer.

Opening the door, she saw that Alistair's lean face was unusually flushed. Where he normally feigned an air of authority on entering her flat, he was plainly agitated as he stepped through the doorway. He plunged down the long hall, not bothering to make his typically cryptic allusions to her lateness or to comment on the way she looked as he had done on every other visit.

Mandy followed him into the bedroom and was surprised to see Alistair already undressing himself, his anger at her delay devoured by his arousal. When he began talking it was not of his weekly success story but of an incident at a local hospital. As he masturbated in front of her he asked Mandy if she had watched the news the night before. She knew immediately that he was referring to a story which had had

a profound effect on her. A fourteen-year-old girl had been raped in her hospital bed by an unknown male. The rape had lasted for more than an hour. The next morning an image of this faceless girl kept slipping across Mandy's mind, like a shadow over a usually clear screen. She had been grateful that before her appointment with Alistair she had seen only one client – a sixty-five-year-old retired barrister who liked to be held gently with one arm while she used her free hand to bring him to a wistful climax.

Now here was Alistair, talking of this same girl. For a wild moment she even thought that maybe it was him, that perhaps he had finally slipped into terminal darkness and raped the girl himself. But she had learnt to recognize the guilty shapes of Alistair's desire, to understand that he still only fantasized about making this final bid for what he called 'mastery' over women.

His preoccupation with domination prevented him from acting on impulse. Whatever risks he took, irrespective of their intensity, Alistair always weighed them against the threat they might pose to his long-term pursuit of even greater power.

That was where Mandy came in; for she was his 'everywhore', paid to satisfy his harshest remorse. As she watched him swell with lust she felt faint comfort in the realization that Alistair was too cunning to succumb to his most glaring weakness. He only dreamed that it was him stealing through the hospital grounds and into the children's wing where he picked out the girl for himself. Before he could reach the imagined point where he was about to force himself into her, before he could pick up his murmuring 'everywhore' mantra, Mandy turned her back on him and walked towards the cellar.

Alistair, hoarse with craving, shouted after her that he wasn't ready yet, that he still had much more to tell her. She walked on silently, forcing him to follow her down the stairs, cursing her for being 'a fucking stuck-up bitch'. He wasn't crawling either when he reached the cellar floor. She

might have felt a spasm of fear as he towered over her, with the veins standing out in purple welts across his body, if her own rage hadn't felt so bottomless.

She spat some words back at him, struggling to control the tone of her voice so that he would not guess the pain he had caused her. It was as though these words were the first blows to strike him. He sank back on the black couch. This time he did not have to ask her to manacle his arms and legs for she did so before he could turn over to lie face downwards. For once it was Alistair who felt an encroaching sense of horror as the beating began.

The belt whipped across his bare legs, his now limp genitals, his stomach, his chest and finally his face for five or more minutes until his silence was broken by screaming and then by a pleading that she should stop, that he could not bear the pain. The skin on the masochistic back of his body had gathered a hardness during the years of being struck by the belts and whips of prostitutes. But his front was tenderly susceptible to pain. Even his psychological humiliation, deepened by being strapped on his back, was overshadowed by the physical pain raining down on him.

When she stopped she found no solace in his sobbing apologies. She knew that she had beaten nothing from him. Nothing had changed for either of them, even though Alistair had felt real pain rather than the imagined hurt he paid to escape from at the end of every S&M session.

Even as he began to dress himself once more in the silence of her cream room the strap marks faded from his whitened face. Soon they would be gone, leaving the surface smooth and pink again. When he finally walked down her hallway, his composure regained in time to match the singing alarm on his watch, he was back to his old self. 'I'm not sure what got into you today, Mandy Kavanagh,' he said as a way of parting, 'but you were at your very best. You should surprise me more often, it does us both the world of good. See you next Tuesday, my love . . .'

She wordlessly closed the door behind him. He was gone for another week from her home, but not from the bleak vistas of her heart. Mandy felt as if she were about to crack open under the weight of that one word, 'Why?', which followed her down the hall, up the salmon-shaded staircase and into the centre of her favourite blue room, in the place where she shut herself away from the world outside. It was still light out there but everywhere looked dark beneath her steady, lowered gaze.

'Mandy Kavanagh,' murmured Alice the following Sunday afternoon, 'is the strangest, most beautiful woman I have ever met. There's no-one else like her; she does things in a way the rest of us haven't even dreamed of. When you're with her you realize that she's living her life like it's a story, like some savage story that's told to you in the most exquisite language you've ever heard. And, yeah, I can already tell – you fucking want to hear this story, you want to meet this girl. I'm right, aren't I, sweetie?'

Alice Teague was almost always right, as she was then. Yet just a few hours earlier it had been hard to imagine anyone looking as strikingly unusual as Alice did while walking towards me with her own strange kind of sinewy grace. It was my first time, my maiden meeting with a prostitute. All I could think was 'So *this* is what "*they*" really look like?'

Alice looked so good that I tried to force home the reminder that she was actually a former prostitute, as if it was an impossibility that she could ever have looked this free when she worked the streets, the parlours and the agencies. I also would never have guessed, as she moved closer towards me with such careless fluidity, that she was listening to John Coltrane on her pink Walkman, to a beautiful song called *Blues For Bechet*. Instead my head kept swirling with its banal wondering as to whether this woman could *really* once have been a prostitute or whether I'd mistaken her for someone else, someone completely different.

The despondent tennis players, the kite-flying families and the roller-skating lovers along this stretch of Hampstead Heath were apparently even more at a loss. They could not guess who Alice could possibly be: a fearfully bolshie feminist or merely a brash slut? The only certainty was that they didn't have a clue, for they all stopped to stare. Their eyes hooked into the sight of Alice walking, as only she knew, in time to Coltrane. Her blonde stream of hair was pulled back loosely from her sharply featured face by deep blue ribbons while her Doc Martens were tied with red laces and topped with fluorescent green socks and immaculately faded 501s. But, amid all this colour, the large black words on both the front and back of her crisp white T-Shirt stood out, forcing Hampstead's gently unco-ordinated Sunday afternoon activity to lapse into a perplexed pause. As the gaping mouths and furtive whispers indicated, 'Vindication Of The Rights Of Whores' and 'Prostitutes In Paradise' were not part of the bantering lexicon usually used in this picnic-friendly zone.

Yes, I breathed a little more quickly, this was Alice all right; a different kind of frisbee-flinger from the rest of us watching her meander down the tarred path which was warm with sunshine for the first Sunday in months. She soon stood right in front of me, raising an inquisitive, immaculately lined eyebrow.

'Alice?' I asked tentatively.

'Who else?' she laughed.

With my stare pulled back towards her T-Shirt, her laughter curled into words: 'I wasn't sure what you looked like so I thought I'd better wear something so you couldn't miss me! Anyway, what else is a bad girl gonna wear across her chest? You know where this comes from?'

'Vindication Of The Rights Of Whores', I said clumsily, came from the title of a book featuring an international cross-section of prostitutes who gathered together at the 'Second World Whores' Congress' in Brussels in 1986. They had adapted its title from Mary Wollstonecraft's ground-

breaking book, *A Vindication Of The Rights Of Women*, published at the end of the eighteenth century.

As if I had passed an opening test question, Alice patted me on the cheek and said, 'Good boy.' She then proceeded, humming with her Walkman, to lead me across the Heath. I was intrigued that a prostitute, even a *retired* prostitute, would have known about Coltrane. My shameful amazement must have been obvious for she flashed a pitying smile when I asked her if this was why she chose to use 'Alice' as a pseudonym, since it was the name of Coltrane's wife. 'No, sweetie,' she said, 'it's 'cos I make men think they've discovered wonderland when they fuck me.'

Apparently galvanised by the success of this prelude Alice set off a bubbling burst of questions relating to my muddled opinions on sadomasochistic sex and Britain's current legislation on kerb-crawling. By the time we had reached the edge of South End Green I was reeling beneath the weight of her interrogation and the curious stares from the Sunday strollers.

Alice appeared oblivious to such attention for she guided me into a crowded Hampstead pâtisserie, full of cultured colour-supplement readers, pipe-smokers and beret-wearers. While pondering her choice of cream cakes, Alice sealed with certainty my suspicion that she was less shy than I was. 'Boy,' she said in a loud voice, 'you've got a lot of catching up to do on bondage and kerb-crawling.'

The sidelong glances aimed at our table froze in disbelief. But these hipsters were so cool that their eyes soon thawed under arched eyebrows and averted noses. The magazine flipping and cappuccino sipping resumed, as did the burr of more sensitive conversation.

Finding a table in the most obscure corner, Alice's own talk was muffled by the adjoining walls and by her fantastic demolition of a walloping Black Forest gâteau. In between mouthfuls, she confirmed what I had already heard about her past. After three tedious years at Sussex University,

during which time she gained her English degree, she accepted an offer to join London's most exclusive escort agency. After a further three years she left the agency to work on her own. For nine months, 'during my golden days as a prostitute', she worked the lucrative streets of Mayfair before branching out into her final venture, as a massage-parlour owner in Camden.

Although it initially appeared as if she had descended through the ranks of the sex industry, the longer Alice Teague worked as a prostitute the more control she carved out for herself. From being merely a cog in a large agency to owning her own business, Alice had seen prostitution from all tangents. After seven years she decided that she wanted a break, for 'there were a lot of other things I wanted to do with my life'.

Although now ensconced in a new career and a steady relationship, Alice maintained her links with other prostitutes. 'It wasn't a conscious decision to keep in touch with prostitution but I found that I had made so many friends over the years that it's just happened that way. Girls phone me up from all over the place, usually just to say "Hi" but then other problems creep into their conversation – they've been rumbled by the police again or there's a problem with a fucked-up client. Having stepped back from the day-to-day work I'm more able to be sympathetic. In the past maybe I would have just said, "Get on with it. This shit goes with the job, honey." Now I listen more, I try to offer practical solutions. Maybe I'm going to have to take this up another notch or two and go more high-profile.

'But, you know, that's a huge personal step to take. If I come out publicly as an advocate for the rights of prostitutes then you can be sure I'll drown in a river of hypocrisy. That typical British hypocrisy will ruin my other work, it'll put a terrible strain on my current relationship. So, in the meantime, I just go my own way, doing what I can, deciding if I should come out and take on the

Establishment. Who knows what I'll eventually do? In the meantime, my sweet, tough whores keep on calling me.'

Alice sentimentally called her 'sweet, tough whores' names like 'Gloria', 'Alicia', 'Roberta', 'Lola' and 'Shana'. She laughed long and hard when I asked if every prostitute she knew had a name ending in the letter 'a'. 'I'm just as big on the 'y' girls too, baby. You know there's "Cand-y", "Mand-y", "Sand-y" and even a "Rand-y" on my list. Then there're those more exotically-named whores – like "Angel" and "Harp" and "Lightning" and "Storm" and even "Enema Lady". But a special favourite is my one friend who gives the best escorting head in London while calling herself either "Germaine" or "Greer". It depends on her mood which name she uses with a new client. Some names just stick. I stuck with "Alice" as mirrors were always my kind of erotic aid.'

Alice, intent on parading through her gleaming array of prostitutes, spent the next hour and a half telling me about the kinky sex tricks and psychological dents of almost everyone from 'Gloria' to 'Germaine', or 'Greer'. Only one name was excluded – Mandy. When I asked her why, especially as she had started her 'Prostitutes In Paradise' litany with that reference to Mandy as 'the strangest, most beautiful woman' she had ever met, she looked meditatively at me. The frivolity of her chocolate gâteauing and whorish name-checking was forgotten.

'Here you are,' she eventually said, 'sitting with me, recording the sexy stories of a retired jazz and cake-loving ex-whore and you know I don't even have to ask why. I know you're sorta waiting for me to give you the nod, to say, "Yeah, write a different sort of book, baby." But I think you've already decided. So before I tell you anything about Mandy, tell me what you think you might write about us.'

That was the type of question which could only be answered confidently after a few hours of steady drinking. As our intake had been limited to a polite pot of herbal tea,

I bumbled about not being certain why I had even asked to meet her. I was more interested in writing than prostitution. Yet, ever since I had passed on the chance of ghosting the story of an escort agency queen, I had been unable to shake the subject from my mind. I started thinking about what it might mean to be a prostitute, about the stories which lay beneath the clichés and about the women who lived beyond the stereotypes of the 'Lolas' and 'Candys'. And then I began to wonder about the men who made up that secret other half of prostitution.

Despite the British public's enduring fascination, as attested by the media's propensity to seek out 'sex-for-sale' scandals, it seemed to me that prostitution's real stories were still to be told. Perhaps this perception had much to do with the fact that I saw myself as being a kind of outsider in this country, as a disenchanted white South African with a heart lost somewhere between Johannesburg and Arsenal FC. I wasn't sure yet how I could write these prostitution stories but I wanted to hear as many as possible. To do this I knew that I would have to be something more than a 'ghost-writer'; I would have to move much closer to the core of prostitution than I might have done during an arm's-length recording of one particular Madame's memoirs.

Alice listened pensively. Then suddenly she started laughing, as she already had done so often that afternoon, and leaned over and patted me once more on the cheek. 'You'll do just fine, sweetie. So, yeah, I think you should write this book and I think you should start with Mandy because she's so different. She's the last type of person who's supposed to become a prostitute. There seems to be some dark secret to her life.

'But hell, I don't really know. I've only met the girl twice. She called me up, right out of the blue. She says she's heard about me, that she wants to talk to me. She says she's been working for three-and-a-half years and that she's only got another eighteen months to go. She won't explain completely what she means by that. She doesn't say too much about

herself. She asks me more about other prostitutes – girls on the street, girls in parlours. "How are things for them?" she says, with those big, grey eyes of hers opened up wide and beautiful, like she's never turned a trick in her life.

'All this time she's been working completely on her own, running things just the way she wants them. She doesn't sound or look or act like any kind of whore I've ever met but she says that's what she is – "a whore". I call her "Crystal-Whore" 'cos she's like shining, quality cut-glass. But there's something else about her, something that I can't understand yet, something that makes me unsure whether her life is a thing of beauty or tragedy. Maybe you'll find out for me, sweetie. All I really know is that you start with Mandy Kavanagh and who knows where the fuck you'll end up? But you can bet you're gonna run through some peachily fucked-up stories . . .'

I learned for a second time that Alice Teague was invariably right when I spoke to Mandy Kavanagh the following week. She sounded different from any prostitute I had dreamed up in my head. Her telephone voice was, as Alice implied, crystal-like, but with an edge to it. It set me flicking back and forth between mazy images of what type of face a voice like this might emerge from, as if she could actually be an eloquent singer or an actress rather than the 'whore' she claimed to be.

But, if nothing else, I was learning to recognize that my preconceptions were hopeless. I remembered my surprise at the way Alice had looked on that sunny Sunday afternoon and tried to concentrate instead on the words Mandy was actually saying. They were chosen carefully. Our conversation faltered awkwardly between her precision and my rambling before she finally said that it would be best if I wrote to her, telling her something about myself and my reasons for wanting to meet her.

It seemed much easier to write than speak to her over the phone and so I sent her two single-space pages of typeface that same night. I told her that I was from South Africa

and that I guessed I would always think of it as home even though I wondered if I'd ever live there again. I wrote about what it had been like to spend the first twenty-odd years of my life in a country as beautiful as it was blighted, in the suburban surrealism of a town called Germiston, just outside Johannesburg, where there were a handful of girls at my school who worked as afternoon hookers in the reeds along a set of railway tracks when they were fourteen or fifteen years old. I remembered being interested in them. But as a sixteen-year-old imagined stud, I thought that I only had to observe them at a distance like I had already done with the young black 'domestic servants' who sometimes, for a couple of rand, would shed white teenage boys of their virginity.

That had been the first time I had ever thought about prostitution. It was twelve more years before its reality sank in with any lasting impact. I had returned briefly to Johannesburg in 1990, having left for London in '84 when the South African military could be evaded no longer. I went with a friend to a hotel in Hillbrow, Johannesburg's most recklessly bohemian quarter where black and white people began living alongside each other years before they did anywhere else in South Africa. It was around two in the morning and we were both drunk, but with that delicious kind of drunkenness where the only sensible thing seems to be the hunt for yet another bottle. We knew that The Quirinale was the one hotel where we were sure of finding drink all night, for it was Johannesburg's most notorious brothel. The hotel's residents were exclusively young black women who had left the townships for the more profitable, if similarly hard, life they led as prostitutes to an unbroken stream of white men, many of whom were defiantly bearded Afrikaners.

My friend and I found the murkiest corner of the lounge and, smiling our pissed 'Not tonight, thanks' smiles at the slickly questioning Quirinale girls, we settled back with a few more drinks. It was a good, hazy feeling being back

home again, as strains of township pop blared across a dance floor heaving with nervous Afrikaans men and seductive black prostitutes dancing towards the 'New South Africa'. Then, as if in a dream, a young woman appeared from the shadows of the bar and knelt down in front of me. 'Don, it is you, isn't it?' she asked. My friend gave me a knowing look as if to say he had always been hip to my liaison with prostitution. The night's drink tumbled through me and I looked at her blankly, until she spoke again. 'Don't you know? It's me Grace! You know, Grace from Bop . . .'

'Bop' was Bopasenatla High, a school in Diepkloof, Soweto, where I had taught English, prior to the township being engulfed by a State Of Emergency. Grace had been my star student, a girl my own age who loved Keats, Hardy and Eliot, even though the sun would be baking down outside our prefab classroom and the desks were lined with dust. Then, she too wanted to be a writer. After we had hugged each other we were suddenly shy for we were both unsure what to say about her working there as a prostitute. But somehow, as I wrote to Mandy Kavanagh, I felt the same as I had always done about Grace from Bop as we drank through the early morning. She was coping, despite the Afrikaans clientele and the undeniable fact that her life had gone through a terrible upheaval to reach that point.

That was one of my own stories, I wrote, but having returned to London and spent the previous Sunday with Alice Teague I was now interested in meeting her, Mandy. In the last line of that letter I made the barest allusion to the type of book I might write about prostitution, a subject I felt I was being pulled inexorably towards.

Two days later, a postcard of Camus wearing a raincoat in Paris dropped through the letter-box. It was from Mandy and she wrote, simply: 'I liked your letter and, yes, I think it would be interesting if we meet. This Friday evening seems right. Alice has my address. Come see me around seven. Mandy K.' It was as if she knew there was no question that

I would be there that Friday, as if the story had already begun, as if it were a river down which all we could do was drift, mapless, towards our unknown destination.

Mandy Kavanagh's house, the place she also worked from, was reminiscent of the set an advertising director might use for a turn-of-the millennium commercial about easy access banking or provocative perfume. White fans hung from the ceiling and dark venetian blinds lined every window. Apart from the cellar, the starkly tiled kitchen and bathroom, each of the rooms contained only one primary object. There was a music centre in the first room, a TV/VCR system in another, a computer in the third, a big low slung bed next door to that and an outlandish metal bookcase in her lounge. This was her favourite room, her most private place. As if in recognition of its special slot in her heart it was slightly more cluttered than the others. Here there was also an old oak table, a battered Turkish chair, her high-backed rocker and a lush black velvet sofa which appeared to be her lone stab at opulence.

Every room was painted a different colour – bright yellow in the music suite, pale grey for the video den, light green for the study and rich cream in the room with the bed. Mandy's favourite room, with its overflowing book case, was dark blue. Along the white passages leading from one room to the next there were elegantly framed prints – by Klee, Picasso, Mapplethorpe and Cartier-Bresson – and black and white photographs of Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett with Buster Keaton, Miles Davis and a young Iggy Pop. At the end of this stylish gallery of alienation there was a smaller but much more intensely personal photograph. Although it was also attractively framed, this photo was nothing more than an over-exposed, blown-up Polaroid print. It was the most shattering image in the whole house.

The photograph had been taken thirteen years ago, on Mandy's twentieth birthday, when she looked much older

than she does now. Then her hair was cropped short and bleached with peroxide. But her face belied her age, with all gloss and tautness struck from the skin. It hung shapelessly above her thin neck, literally ghost-like in its whiteness.

She sat on a single bed in a small white room, lit by a bulb above her head. Her eyes were wide and heavily ringed as if it had been weeks since she had last slept. Lower down, on the pitted surface of her upturned arms, the cause became clear. Her skin was covered with yellow and purple blotches. They were raw with needle marks. She held her emaciated arms up to the camera like she was making some kind of sacrifice. No matter how many times you walked down that passage it was impossible to pass this image easily, as though it was an adornment rather than some harrowing statement of personal history.

'That's me turning twenty,' said Mandy Kavanagh the first time I stopped to stare at the picture. It was just after seven on that Friday evening in August 1990, and my nervousness on her doorstep had changed into something different by the time we had reached the end of her hallway. Her voice was so matter of fact, so impersonal even, that she may as well have been talking about a distant cousin's wedding snap as of this depiction of herself at the ebb of life. Yet she looked at the photograph with such self-absorption that its significance to her was obvious.

Mandy had acquired a serenity which enabled her to look back with equanimity at that blackest of times. Her face shone with a soft tug of remembrance rather than with any marked sense of hurt. In the passing years, her face had regained the sculptured lustre found in glossy make-up spreads. Her hair, back to its original colour of black, curled round the edges of her mouth in a relaxed bob. She had given up the dirty white T-shirt and torn jeans for designer clothing.

We had been sitting in the blue room for a couple of hours, her rocking in her wicker chair and me sitting on the

velvet sofa, before she spoke again of the photograph. Through the bay window, from where she used to watch for Alistair, the sun was flattening out against the orange outline of the trees as we emptied our second bottle of wine. After so long, after I had talked and talked and she had prompted me here and there with a question or a comment, it finally seemed right for me to ask her something. Despite the drink and the sun, the image of her which hung in the hall had not slipped away.

She was quiet when I asked her about the photograph, as if she was deciding whether I deserved an answer longer than a few words. I had already told her so much about myself, about Johannesburg and Soweto, about arriving in London and not knowing a soul in the city, about my cheery evasions of the moustached men of both the South African army and the British Aliens' Office, about lost girlfriends and dead friends, about the feelings of attraction and bewilderment I had felt when first seeing Alice Teague, that it was as though I was there to be interviewed by her. Perhaps my willingness to talk instead of question touched a chord in her because she at last ended her silence with a story so strange that I did not have the breath to interrupt her.

'It was my birthday, that day,' she said in her characteristic murmur, 'the day I turned twenty. Six months before, to the exact day, on the twentieth of December, I started taking heroin. It wasn't the usual sort of scene, where you fall into it at a party or because of a boyfriend. I took it on my own that first time; and I deliberately chose heroin. There's little in life that's more extreme than being addicted to smack. But when I started I was like a child. I didn't have a clue as to what I was really letting myself in for. I thought it would be the ultimate test of will-power, of desire if you like, but it was only much later that I realized the horror of what I was doing.

'Essentially it was a very simple experiment. When I was nineteen-and-a-half I decided on this test. For six months,

not a day more and not a day less, I would take heroin. Then, on the twentieth of June, the day I turned twenty, I would stop. As pure as that.

'I guess, if you really wanted, you could uncover any number of psychological reasons for doing such a thing. I was just fascinated by the idea of heroin and of course it was hopelessly romantic. I wanted to experience this thing which gave such a rush that people laid down everything for it. And even more than this, I wanted to know if I could survive heroin. I wanted to know if I had the desire to overcome the craving.

'When I started I wasn't quite sure what to expect. I began quite slowly, shooting up every ten days, trying to measure the full thrill of it when I felt the smack going right inside me. The first five or six times were truly wonderful and I realized then that there was a chance that I wouldn't want to come off it. I made the mistake of imagining that it was just about will-power. But heroin has much more to do with the body than the mind. I was fucked by the absolutely mindless need for physical relief every day. There were days, maybe weeks even, when I never believed I'd be able to give up on the day I said I would.

'I was burying myself in this white junk and if I hadn't started from such a weird tangent maybe I would never have found the motivation to cut back a little, just a little, every day during the last six weeks. But still, when it came, the twentieth of June, I didn't know how I was going to come off. If you look closely at that photograph you see how devastated I was. There's real terror there. Not the fear of dying but the sheer terror that my body would be denied heroin, which had become my whole life.

'But I came through that day, and the next, which I thought would be the worst, only to find that the third and fourth days were even more excruciating. It was also mid-summer and unbearably hot. But by the fifth day the need eased a little and I could think about what was happening to me and what I still had to do. By the end of the next week

I knew that I would never go back to it. I was off, and really lucky to be off it.

'I'm now, I guess, scrupulously healthy. I don't smoke – and although you might not believe it the way we're sinking this wine tonight, I rarely drink. I exercise every day. I feel pretty strong. But that photograph stays in the hall because it's from a time which was very real to me. I sought out that experience knowing that, if I survived it, it would be something to remember rather than to forget. And I've tried to remember it as clearly as possible so that it remains as something more than a sentimental memory.

'Everything about those six months is there in that photograph. I came through it intact but the truth of that time is not glorious. Endurance is not glorious, it's not romantic. And that's what I did, that day of my twentieth birthday; I decided to endure, to go on, as best I could . . .'

There had been moments earlier in the evening, with me talking urgently and her rocking silently, when Mandy looked like she was from a chillingly beautiful autistic world. She seemed content to sway back and forth, until my words dried up and she would replenish another stream from me with just the gentlest question which again diverted attention from her. But now it was if some latch had been lifted from her own casket of stories. The next three hours were filled by her voice outlasting the batteries on my tape-recorder as she took me through the different stages of her life.

She began by answering my bemused question as to why she had felt the need to actually prove to herself that she could overcome a junkie addiction. Surely you could be curious about heroin without having to test your inner resolve to survive its shattering effects for a specific period of time? Why hadn't she just tried it once or twice, for pleasure, if she felt so compelled, and *then* tested her resolve never to try it again? 'I don't think that's really the key question, do you?' she retorted with a withering stare. 'Surely it's more puzzling that most people just fall thoughtlessly into addiction, that they're just random victims

of some "accident" they claim to have had no control over? Isn't that more fucked – that you become a junkie without knowing it?'

I remained unconvinced. While it would certainly be more interesting to know why someone chose to drive at top-speed into a brick wall on a dry afternoon instead of guessing why another person spun off a wet road and smashed into that same brick wall on a rainy night, it'd be difficult to argue that the accidental crash was the product of a less controlled mind. Mandy smiled at my 'facetious analogy', saying that it was similarly difficult for her to think that she had been uncontrolled when she began her 'six-month affair with smack'.

I thought it peculiar that she described her addiction as an 'affair' but, as she traced her first twenty years, it became increasingly apparent that love or, to be more exact, the absence of love, had shaped the seemingly smooth curves of her life. She had been born into an extremely wealthy family and had lived with her parents, two older brothers and a sister in a Hertfordshire mansion until she was seventeen. They were a family with a considerable political and military heritage and so it was preordained that Mandy would follow her sister to the country's most prestigious school for 'young ladies', an institution favoured by those who dreamed that their daughters might, in Mandy's words, 'one day become a real-life princess or, at the very least, the wife of some fucking terrific captain of industry'.

'It's trite, I guess,' she continued, 'to pin everything on those years and on my family but that doesn't stop me from wondering if I would have done less extreme things with my life if it hadn't been for them. It's not that I wish we had been poor or that I had been an abused child because when I look around I see how lucky I was to have had such a comfortable life. I never had any problems about coming from the wrong side of the tracks. I've never had a day of hunger in my life. I've never wanted anything materially that I couldn't get if I asked long enough. I hated the school I

went to but it gave me some kind of start in education and I had friends. It wasn't like I felt desperately unhappy or anything – Christ, even then I knew I was lucky.'

But money and luck, as another homily suggests, do not always bring love and Mandy Kavanagh's teenage life was one of secure lovelessness. 'I can't remember any spontaneous show of love in our family. My mother and father were mutilated by their good manners, so much so that they were incapable of feeling anything as uncontrollable as love. Or looking on the bright side, maybe they did love us but were unable to express it. Whatever, it made no difference. My life with them always felt cold. But as I got older that seemed to bother me less than the complacency of their lives. I remember how they would just try to "smooth things over" all the time. If I was snotty in my teenage rebel phase they would hardly notice for it was too embarrassing for them to look beneath the surface, to see if there was a problem of some sort. That just deepened my cynicism and so I escaped into things like books and records.

'But the fact that I became a junkie and that I am now a prostitute is not just because of my upbringing. I don't need any excuses to justify the way my life has gone. The heroin decision had as much to do with my obsession with certain songs and books as it did with just a basic rejection of my past. When I decided to shoot smack for six months I had already moved away from home and I had no intention of returning to our village to shock Mrs Mitten, the tweedy next-door neighbour, or to upset all those girls called Clarissa and Rowena-Jane who I used to go to school with and who're now married to stockbrokers and polo players.

'It was always much more personal than that. It was nothing to do with revenge. Instead it was all about my own heart, about letting loose everything that was swirling around in there. You know I was just a young girl living in a Holloway bed-sit on bacon sandwiches and chocolate

biscuits while out of every pocket some book would be jutting.'

'What kind of books?'

'I dunno . . . books by Rilke and Baudelaire and books like *Nausea* and *Notes From The Underground*.'

'It sounds like you were a hip kind of Holloway girl,' I said.

'Yeah, I was pretty hip. It was 1977, after all, and I was also into punk and, even more so, into Iggy Pop and The Velvet Underground. I used to just love that wasted glory that shone off Iggy, the most beautiful junkie there's ever been. And my favourite song was the Velvet's *Heroin* which, 'cos Lou Reed used a needle or two round that time, came pretty close to sounding like the rush that smack gives you. So I found all these nihilistic ideas to be echoing my life up until then. To you it must seem kinda crazy but then you had a completely different life to me – what with those years in Soweto and all those cute teenage prostitutes along the railway tracks? You can laugh but, really, you had other choices to make. And, with me, six months of heroin seemed the right thing to do at the time.'

Having had a romantically existential adolescence myself, I could identify with some of the reasons behind Mandy's heroin experiment. Yet I was more interested in trying to link those six months with her decision to become a prostitute. She, meanwhile, moved ahead at her own dreamy pace. With the aid of a battered old sewing basket which acted as her crate of memorabilia she took me through her subsequent four-year career at London University, during which time she acquired a Master of Philosophy degree, and two more years as a professional model. She dipped in and out of her sewing box to produce pictures and certificates as if to quell any scepticism that a prostitute could ever have, in orthodox terms, achieved so much. The photographs clearly meant more to her than the 'meaningless' academic qualifications. But the attraction of well-paid, jet-setting modelling waned within the first year. After another twelve

months, in which she gritted her teeth through the unremitting boredom of seeing out her contract, she could hardly bear the thought of having to hang around for a photographer to give her the command to 'pout girlishly' or 'go sultry' for the benefit of his camera.

'So there I was at twenty-nine-and-three-quarters, after philosophy and modelling, unsure of what to do next. For a mad moment I even thought about marriage. I had been seeing this man, someone who was mildly famous in "entertainment circles", while I had been modelling. I guess my brain was so fried by all the smiling and strutting that I allowed myself to get mixed up with this geek. He was exactly the sort of man a model is expected to "go with" and, in his way, he was the best of a bad bunch. When I gave up on the modelling he broke down and said he loved me and asked me to marry him. I quite liked him at that moment and the thought of having a baby then was quite a spur.

'But I knew that I didn't want to live with him for the rest of my life. I'm sure we could have had a comfortable marriage by conventional standards but it was never going to be enough for me. And I wasn't sold on the idea that he had that he was going to be the economic "powerhouse" in our partnership. He kept saying things like, "but you'll never have to think about working again if you're with me." I'd had enough of that kind of dependence with heroin! So I politely said "No" and decided on another course in life.

'That particular year had been crucial to me – what with the modelling and the marriage proposal. I'm not trying to say I had some sort of unique dilemma because I know there are thousands of other women in this city who feel like I did. Many of them do their own thing in an admirable way. But the whole economic structure of this society is still tilted towards stripping women of the independence that men have. There just seem to be too few women out there equipped to live on their own, free from doubt and fear because they haven't got a husband. It's still not the done

thing to live alone for more than a few years. To me that's a fucked-up morality. Women should have the power to choose the way they want to live. But it isn't easy.

'If you live in a society like we do then you need money – otherwise you're just powerless. And marriage to a wealthy man or finding a high-powered job just 'cos the money's good always struck me as being refined examples of prostitution. That set me thinking: why go in for the hypocrisy when you can go it alone and do the real thing on your own terms?

'So early in March 1987 I decided to become a prostitute. I thought back then to my heroin time and resolved that I wouldn't let myself be destroyed by prostitution. The heroin experiment was, as I said, wildly romantic. This move into prostitution was more considered. It was planned. It was mercenary. There was nothing personal about this decision, just the fact that I knew prostitution could earn me the money I needed to live the way I wanted. I worked out that I could probably earn around £70,000 a year as a prostitute. Five years of that would free me from worry about money for a long time. So, I decided that I would be a prostitute for exactly five years – not a day more, not a day less – and tonight, you know, there are only five hundred-odd days to go. Let's have another drink to that, boy . . .'

As we opened another bottle of wine, all my previous speculation on prostitution appeared redundant. Before meeting Alice Teague and then Mandy Kavanagh, I had been under the spell of the liberal assumption that 'prostitute' was merely another word for 'victim' and that any woman who worked in the sex industry was inevitably subject to nothing but crass exploitation and abuse. Yet there was little doubt that both Alice and Mandy, with their degrees and past pedigrees, their sharp minds and strong characters, had had other choices at their disposal besides prostitution. Mandy, in particular, as Alice remarked, was one of those few women who could legitimately make that tenuous claim

of 'having it all', as her success as both a model and post-graduate student suggested. That night, if Mandy Kavanagh was to be considered a 'victim' it would only have been of her own mythology.

Despite exploding traditional concepts of 'the prostitute', there was something unsettling about the extremity of her life. She seemed curiously fated to flip between 'good girl' and 'bad girl' roles – from 'poor little rich girl' to 'junkie', from 'model' to 'whore' – which were more society's constructs than her own. While absorbed in the execution of choice, she lived under an especially harsh personal vision. As I left her South Kensington home of coloured rooms and haunting photographs, knowing that I would soon return, I could only question the personal cost entailed in her dramatic bid for economic 'freedom'.

There is much turmoil in prostitution. This becomes apparent from that first moment when the idea of working as a prostitute is no longer confined to the abstract. That initial step, so different from the hypothetical imaginings women may have about the possibility of their becoming prostitutes, occurs with a tangible move towards the business of selling sex. For Mandy Kavanagh that entailed the concrete decision to advertise herself to prospective clients as a prostitute.

'I remember that I made my decision on a Friday morning. That same afternoon I phoned up this man, Alistair, who I knew had had the hots for me for years. He was just becoming well-known as a big city financier and his wife was interested in fashion. So he used to come to some of the fashion shows and that's where I met him. He was charming, in that unctuous businessman-of-the-year way, and he made it clear to me from our very first meeting that he wanted to take me out. He herded me into a corner and breathed his chocolatey breath all over me. He said I was the most irresistible woman he'd ever laid eyes on. And I was going, "Oh yeah, I wonder what your wife would think

about that?'' He got really creepy then and said that their marriage was effectively over and that they just kept together for the sake of appearances. Then he came right out with it and made it clear that he fancied me so much he'd do anything I wanted, he'd give me anything I needed.

'He backed off when I told him I wanted nothing from him. He left me alone after that 'cos I was firm with him, but I always knew that he wanted me. So the very same Friday that I decided to become a prostitute I called him at his office. He hadn't seen me for about a year and at first he was very debonair on the phone. I said to him that I had a business venture to discuss with him and I wondered if he'd come over to my house the next Tuesday afternoon. He tried to stay cool but he was literally choking with excitement. I guess that's why I started with him. I knew he would take the bait.

'Over the whole weekend and on the Monday I'd stayed fairly calm. Of course I was thinking about it all the time but I was also certain about my decision. I never felt that I might be making an awful mistake for I'd considered the situation very carefully. It wasn't just impulsive, in the way the heroin thing had been. It was only on the Tuesday that I began to feel panicky. I woke up before it was even light and those nine hours before his visit were hell. I just wanted to get it over with but at the same time I was determined that I was going to control our first session. I knew that everything would hinge on the way I dealt with him that first time. If I was vulnerable, if I was nervous, he'd rip me apart. I wanted to be sure that I would dictate the mood of that afternoon.

'I didn't wear anything special – just a black dress and black stockings – and I didn't plaster myself with make-up. I wanted him to remember who he would be dealing with. I was coming out as a whore, but that whore would still be me. He had been a little frightened of me in the past and I didn't want to give up that advantage. But, shit, I was still shaky and feeling sick while I looked out this big window

and waited for him to come. And sure enough, at two minutes to three, he turned the far corner. That set the pattern of our next five years of Tuesday afternoons.

'As soon as he walked down the hall I felt a little stronger. He was making all these jibes at my photographs – "Who are these *clowns*?" he sneered – and I said, "That's *Kafka* and that's *Beckett* and you'd better take your fucking hat off when you look at them!" He liked that, he always likes it when I swear, and so I started to feel my usual disdain for him. He took a seat and I got straight down to business. He spluttered into his coffee cup when I told him I was going to be a prostitute. I think he thought I wanted to be his mistress! I remember him saying, "There's no need to call yourself *that*," and I said, "But, Alistair, *that* is what I now am. I am a prostitute."

'I said this would be a purely business arrangement between us. I told him I'd charge him £150 to have sex and he agreed straight off even though that was quite a steep price to pay in '87. I gulped then because I knew the crunch point had come. So I took him into the bedroom and told him to get undressed. It was more nerves than anything that made me seem so decisive. He did as he was told and soon he was standing naked before me. He wasn't the prettiest sight I'd ever seen and, although I was a little repulsed by him, I felt in control. It was all over in about a minute and I thought "Phew, is that it?"

'Of course it wasn't because I felt pretty bad about having him inside me and when we got dressed again he seemed full of himself. Me being a whore was a great idea, he said, and before he left he wanted to discuss next week's session with me. I was a bit taken aback because I thought he'd just want to scuttle out of the door. Not Alistair though. So back we went to my blue room and he told me about his sexual desires. He was tactful about it in the beginning but it still came as a shock to me. He asked me if I had ever whipped anyone before, if I'd ever dominated anyone. I remember saying, trying to stay as cool as possible, "I could

whip you all right, Alistair." I was in way over my head – I didn't know the first thing about bondage but, again, it seemed essential not to yield any ground to him. I told him that I would charge more for punishment and he said, "Of course, my dear, money's no problem with me, as you know."

'He talked on and on about his need to be dominated and disciplined. My mouth was just about falling open – after all, the most extreme thing *I'd* ever done sexually up until then was "69" a couple of times with my last boyfriend and even that had made me blush a little. Anyway I just brazened my way through with Alistair and he never had a clue how much he had disturbed me. It was only after he left that I cried a little. But it was more to do with relief that he had gone than with shame for myself.

'I had made my mind up about prostitution so there was no going back. But it was really hard that first time – especially all his bondage talk. I remember I had a bath and then I went to bed for the rest of the day. But I felt OK the next morning and I went down to the Ann Summers shop in Charing Cross Road and I bought my first whips and belts and, *voila!*, there I was – "The Terminator Angel", a leather-bound Dominatrix!'

And so it was 'The Terminator Angel' herself who first uncovered for me the struggle for control which beats at the heart of prostitution. Money and lust may keep the wheels of the sex business turning but the sparks which those wheels inevitably shed come from deep within the prostitutes' unequal strife with their clients, pimps and the police. Yet I had begun at the very top, with Mandy Kavanagh, where the struggle tilted in her favour.

Even though she was the first prostitute I came to know well it was never possible to imagine that Mandy could be anything but an exception to the usual rule. Her iron grip on her own business as a prostitute was soldered during that initial encounter with Alistair. By choosing to work alone, in her own home, rather than taking the more typical routes

of escort agency or massage parlour or pimped street sex work, Mandy resolved to prostitute herself, as far as possible, on her 'own terms'. She risked danger in seeking out such independent control, for her very apartness from other prostitutes left her isolated and potentially open to unnoticed abuse. But Mandy intuitively knew that prostitution was more about loneliness and that quest for control than the jokey, girls-together camaraderie from which more ordinary hookers draw sustenance.

She also knew that the brutalities of this business mean that there is no such thing as a perfect operation, no such thing as absolute security, no such thing as an effortless life in prostitution. All it takes is one man to destroy everything. If that was the risk then she wanted to be the one who would choose her own clients, who would decide which chances were worth taking.

Through Alistair, she met another man whom she interviewed before deciding to take him on as an additional client. She then also called up a further long-time admirer, someone she had kept at bay in the past, and offered the same business terms as she had to Alistair and his squash-playing colleague. As she emphasized, 'I've always stuck to the same procedure. If a man wants to become a client then he has to apply to me, through one of my existing clients, for an interview. That means I get to pick and choose who I'll see, which I know is a very rare privilege for a prostitute. But I don't think I'm as strong as the women who work in more typical circumstances. I would buckle under the strain they endure. For me to work as a prostitute I need to retain as much control as possible.

'So I've turned down as many men as I've accepted as clients. I've stuck with ten for the last two years and so these boys think they belong to the most exclusive club in town. But I'm in charge. They know that I only take men who accept my terms. I see two men a day, five days a week and they all have their regular appointments. Two of them are retired while the rest of them are still working

so I show a little flexibility. It's only Alistair who has turned his three o'clock Tuesday appointment into a kind of fetish. It takes a really important meeting, once or twice a year, for him to have to change that time. With the rest of them they stick to their day of the week. So if it's a Monday afternoon man then he knows I'll slot him in for an hour anytime between one and eight. Those are the hours I work, Monday to Friday, and I make few exceptions. Anyway none of them ever seem to miss an appointment. They know that if they do I can always show them the door, for there's a whole line of prospective clients waiting to take their place. So I have this routine, this Monday to Friday routine and it goes like clockwork, like £1,500 a week clockwork.'

For all its psychological ramifications, prostitution is essentially a business and, like most money-spinning endeavours, it depends on routine for its stable profitability. While Mandy enlivened my second visit to her home with a witty breakdown of her weekly working hours, I also remembered Alice Teague's grimmer delineation of the routine that less fortunate prostitutes endure. On the streets, it's usually a 10 p.m. to 2 a.m. shift, whatever the weather, while the bed-sit prostitutes of Soho and those advertised in the surrounding telephone booths face a longer 11 a.m. to 11 p.m. span of unremitting visits from anonymous clients. The escort agencies and the massage parlours have their own distinctive working patterns. So even as I listened to Mandy's exotic rendition of her own working week, I could sense the bleakness shadowing my future acquaintance with different routines of prostitution.

'You know,' said Mandy, 'in this job time takes on all sorts of weird shapes. The days blur into each other and time seems to move at different speeds. With some clients the hour passes like any other. With others, especially Alistair, when I have to smell his sweet breath on me as I whisper "you cunt", "you cunt" over and over again while

I whip him, the hour drags like nothing else on earth. Five years can seem like an endless period.

'But routine keeps me going. Instead of looking at this long stretch of time that lies ahead I've always tried to focus on my routine. I knew when I started that there would be days when I would feel dead inside. I knew that it was possible that every day would feel exactly the same. Because prostitution is like that – it's Nietzsche's theme of "eternal recurrence". The same thing happens again and again to prostitutes. A man comes in one door, fucks the prostitute and goes out another door, only to be replaced by another man who does the same thing before his place is taken by another man. Or else if you're a street-walker you get picked up by a man in a car, he fucks you, drops you off and then the same process is repeated again and again, year after year.

'That's why prostitution is also about deadening yourself. The routine can be so remorseless, with the prostitute on a conveyor-belt, that she has to blank herself - otherwise the repetition, the invasion of her private self, might drive her fucking crazy. But if you are going to make money as a prostitute you also depend on your routine. If you do it only when you feel like it you'll hardly ever work. In a strange way it's like the discipline you need to be a writer. You write every day, no matter how you feel, for you have a routine – it's essential. So it's the same with me, except I have a different routine as a prostitute. I'm luckier than other hookers because I'm able to control my routine – I know who and what to expect when. That may be boring but it is also a source of stability in this business, and it can be such a savage business.'

Mandy remembered that when she first began working as a prostitute she felt 'like the guy in this film I loved when I was a little girl – *If It's Tuesday, This Must Be Belgium*. I'm sure it's a terrible film but it tickled me when I was seven years old. There are days when I wake up and think, "Where am I? What am I doing today?" And then I'd remember. "I'm whoring again today so what day is it?" After a while

it would sink in that it was a Tuesday. If it was Tuesday, it might not be Belgium but it certainly must be me jerking off the retired barrister and then whipping Alistair at three in the bondage cellar. If it's a Monday I'm a sexy vampish fuck to the advertising yuppie and a dildo-waving nun to my ex-politician. On Wednesdays I'm a governess and a strap-wielding Dominatrix to a weepie old judge and a corporate chairman who likes to wear a suspender belt and one of my old dresses. If it's Thursday I talk dirty and give head to a Comparative Literature lecturer and beat a leathery City man while he watches the same old gay porn video. Friday means the week's almost over and to a naughty architect I'm a bisexual honey with kissable feet while a rich painter likes to watch me eat fruit in the nude. Then he jerks off into a half-empty bottle of wine which he slugs from after he's "mixed the juices"! Actually, Friday's the best day as it happens; even now I find it a bit of a giggle . . .'

Then, as a novice in prostitution, I had to giggle myself at the vicissitudes of Mandy Kavanagh's clientele. Another basic assumption of mine, that prostitution automatically meant the exchange of money and fucking, was riddled with misconception. Out of her ten clients, Mandy only had regular intercourse with one man, her advertising executive, and even that would be preceded by a fifty-five minute massage and fashion-show routine which left only the last few minutes for sex. Her two hard-core bondage clients, Alistair and the leather-clad video-watcher, were content to receive their punishment from Mandy without any form of obvious sexual contact with her. The wine-mixing painter also refrained from actually touching her. The remainder of her consumers were mostly recipients of hand and blow jobs and only occasionally would the 'corporate chairman' request intercourse – a change which would cost him a further £100.

'I'm far more likely to take on a man as a client,' Mandy remarked, 'when he's looking for an "imaginative" kind of service rather than straight sex. I *am* a whore so I will

fuck for money but I prefer it if penetration's not involved. Richard, the yuppie who does want to fuck me every week, is my youngest client – he's in his late thirties and claims to have this idyllic family life except for the fact that, apparently, his wife will only have sex in the missionary position. I keep telling him he must be doing something wrong if she's so uptight. Anyway he comes to me so he can do it "doggie" and "side-on" and whatever – "Ho hum" is what I say to myself but he's all right I suppose. It doesn't take him long to get his rocks off, I'll say that for him.

'But the rest of them are in their forties and fifties and they're looking for something different. Of course they're all married and they're sheepish whenever I ask them about their wives because I'm scathing about their hypocrisy. In the beginning they were also frightened of me because they said I didn't look like too many other prostitutes they'd been to. I don't know about that but I settled them down and I've kept on playing these characters they fantasize about – you know, "the nun" or "the governess" or "the foot lady" or the "Dominatrix" or the "foul-mouthed bitch" or the "fruit-eating virgin nudist". It's like being in a Repertory Drama Company in a way – one day you're doing "Lady Macbeth", the next you're "the witch", then you're "Lolita", then you're "Miss Jean Brodie" or, God forbid, you're having to do *The Mousetrap* again in the cellar.'

For all their sardonic mockery, Mandy's theatrical analogies uncovered an essential truth about prostitution – that acting, and fantasy, are never far from the surface. Yet the various roles she plays are as reductive in their masculine-coded ways as those of 'junkie' and 'model' which she chose before embarking on her five-year career.

But in prostitution, where the most personal act of intimacy between two people is reduced to a repetitively impersonal business exchange, the survival of the woman living within the timeworn shell of the 'whore' often depends

on the skill with which she manipulates her various personae. 'Mandy Kavanagh', after all, is not her only pseudonym. To her clients she is also 'The Terminator Angel', 'Ms K', 'Madame M', 'Miss Pussy Boots', 'Amanda-Jane' and, even, 'Mandsy-Girl'. For their fat weekly fee, some of which is paid by standing order into a Jersey bank account, the men get to choose Mandy's alias while she gives their fantasies, and an hour of her time, back to them.

As Mandy said a few Tuesdays later, 'At first I found it demoralising that the names I had to use were either these harsh Dominatrix words or these infantile "Mandsy-Girl" virgin titles. Then, as you do in this business, I became inured to it. The names are now meaningless to me, as are the personae. I'm more concerned about keeping myself together when I'm around someone like Alistair.

'And *you're* also going to find this the further you go into prostitution – that there's always this jarring conflict between the whore and the john, between the woman and the man, between the person and the persona, between the personal and the impersonal.

'I felt that terribly today when Alistair was here. He went back again to that horrific hospital girl rape fantasy of his. I was hoping he had forgotten after all these months – but he never will. And I was so frightened of what he made me feel. He has such anger towards women, towards our sexual power, and so he wants to demean women ceaselessly. But because he's sharp enough to know that his true power over women lies with his money and status he comes here to channel his worst desires.

'When we're in the cellar together I sometimes feel almost deformed by my own rage at him. There're times when I feel I could happily beat him to death. But there's this restricting struggle of morality between me and "The Terminator". He knows I'll only go so far. You know, he thinks he's really winning our struggle. I asked him today what he'll do when I'm no longer his "Terminator Angel".

'He just laughed in my face, with his foul minty breath,

and said, "Who do you think you're kidding, Angel? You're a whore for keeps. *My whore*. All this five-year talk is complete crap. Once a whore, always a whore. Once a woman, always a whore. You're *mine*, Terminator," he kept crooning as I started hitting him with the belt again, "You're mine, you're mine . . ." '

Chapter Two

The Cellar of Pain

A month had passed since Mandy Kavanagh first led me through the multi-coloured rooms of her home. In that short time it seemed as if everything both around and inside me had changed. It was not just the fact that the cold rains of the previous month had been replaced by the enervating heat of a belated summer. Neither was it merely the point that my own routine had been reshaped by the numerous visits I made to her house during August; by the end of which time I knew I would write about 'The Terminator Angel'.

There were deeper shifts, more elusive to name and more difficult to interpret, within these seasonal and writing permutations. Primed by Alice Teague, I had arrived at Mandy Kavanagh's home that first Friday evening expecting to meet someone different, someone who existed beyond the stereotype of the victimized prostitute. But nothing could have prepared me for the physical deconstruction of prostitution which Mandy embodied. She tore up every preconception I had nurtured about the way a hooker should look and sound, about the background she was meant to creep from, about the relentless humiliation she was supposed to suffer day in, day out. These *were* factors, if sometimes only for the exceptional difference she brought to their existence, but their true weight could only be felt once they were regarded from her personal perspective.

In those first visits, instigated more often by her than me, she revealed that perspective with a terrible intimacy. Apart

from helping me, she also used the inexhaustibly whirring tape-recorder for her own purposes. After four mute years, she finally felt able to give voice to herself as the 'Terminator Angel', 'Madame M', 'Ms K' or whoever else she had chosen to be on a given day. There was a kind of unspoken agreement between us that just as I was blatantly unsuited to any sort of priestly or psychiatric role she was not in need of confession; for she had no admission of guilt to make. Rather, we narrated different personal histories. In this way we told each other about ourselves. If these conversations were interviews it was the presence of the tape-recorder which made them so, rather than any rigid definition of roles where I was the interviewer and she the interviewee.

She made another implicit decision to avoid the professional routine which comprised the rest of her week – so, outside of her strict working hours, I visited Mandy at different times and on different days. Through all of this she made me look at prostitution and its attendant practitioners and consumers from a blank start, with that impersonal blankness which every prostitute has to call upon at some time every working day.

But she also made me see more ordinary lives in a clearer light. The generic struggles for dominance in all relationships no longer appeared removed from her own work, streaked as it was with role-inversions and game-playing. Inverted echoes of her S&M stories were everywhere. Even on a crowded tube to South Kensington I could see the subtle manoeuvres for space unfolding as a woman found herself hemmed in between a man and a shut door. He would invariably be the one to thrust forward knowingly, she the one to back up against the door, anxious about this uneven temporality of space in the steaming underground. I would look at the man and wonder if he ever needed the taste of a prostitute's whip to redress that imbalance; and doubt if the woman was as in control of her life as Mandy Kavanagh claimed. Perhaps these were ridiculous

comparisons but against the backdrop of the stories Mandy had already told me, I felt acutely aware of the coded reactions that take place between men and women in public places.

I tried to check these observations by deliberately noticing summery flirtations. In this search for more innocent pleasures there was a seeping fear that my eyes had been jaundiced by even a lone month's exposure to prostitution. But I was seeing what I had always seen.

Whenever I made the short walk that September from the South Kensington underground to Mandy's house, the pubs and cafés spilled out onto the sunlit streets with women in cool dresses and men in shirt sleeves drinking and laughing together as if an endless holiday had just begun. While it appeared as if every sunny face around me was slick with thoughts of love, their flirtations were so full of coquettish promise and grinning anticipation that they seemed to parody prostitution's own caricature of sexuality.

Yet this random game-playing was disturbed by murky images of Alistair. I had the barest physical description of him from Mandy – tall, lean, 'distinguished-looking' with only his mouth and eyes revealing a trace of the cruelty she knew her whipping just about curbed. I found myself imagining him everywhere, while knowing all the time that he was already elsewhere.

I felt him most of all in Mandy's home when she described it as her 'house of pain'. She said these words with a laugh that was impossible to pin down, falling from her mouth with bruising irony. For all the extraordinary control she exerted, her life was ringed with sadness. She told me on the last Sunday of September it was exactly four years to that very day since she had last had 'cashless' sex. Her words came with neither arrogance nor despair but with a softly resonant sense of pain. She knew that feelings of love do not flourish easily in her world, distended as it is with stories of caustic masochism. But she also knew that in the world outside, in that everyday world of apparently 'ordinary'

people, love was ringed with hurt too; and so in her telling of these stories, not everything had to be personal.

Mandy remembered her breath being taken away by the shimmering brightness of the first outfit Robert wore for her. It was a skin-tight cat-suit made out of glistening red leather and covered in golden zips and buckles. Under the spotlights of her video room the suit crackled as if full of a life of its own. It stretched upwards from the ankles to the neck, biting down into his flesh. The only exception to this constriction was the ring of space cut away to allow Robert's buttock-cheeks to pout from the squeezing embrace of leather.

Stunned by the sheer visceral force of the uniform, it took Mandy a moment to register that Robert was also wearing a matching red hood and condom. The mask was pulled down so tightly that he had trouble breathing. A slit of space had been left for his mouth, no larger than the hole opened up over each eye. His breath came in shuddering bursts just as the surrounding leather creaked with the effort of his movements. The effect would have been almost sickeningly sinister if it hadn't been for the saving touch of the red condom. Robert's cock, struggling through the constricting leather, peered valiantly out of his golden trouser zip even though its low-slung eye was covered by the red mist of his Mates' protective hood.

Robert could not move easily or make any comprehensible sound but it was obvious that he was literally suffocating with lust and, more problematically, lack of oxygen. The video was already rolling and Mandy watched for a minute as a slim-hipped Californian surfer learnt a new 'Hang Five' variation as he was fist-fucked by a Dennis Hopper lookalike wearing a black stetson and smoking a thin Indian reefer. At the same time the boy was also giving head to a beefy lifeguard who moaned a suitably surferesque 'Tube that fucker, tube it!' mantra over and over again.

Robert had fast-forwarded *Surf Butt Bandits* to one of

his favourite moments. Even through the slashes, Mandy could see his eyes gleaming as he watched the screen. Eventually he turned to her and with the slightest jerk of his head indicated that it was time that she swapped her wide-eyed astonishment for the chiselled anger of 'Ms K'.

With his last decisive act for the hour Robert spread himself over her black leather 'Lazy Boy' rocker which she had tilted into an inverted, downward-sloping psychiatrist's couch. As he had requested during their original interview, Mandy manacled his bare feet to the special hooks inserted at the back of the chair and hand-cuffed him to the front legs. She thought that it looked as if he was tied to a comfortable ironing board, sloping towards the floor. His chin sank down onto the foot rest which she yanked up a notch so that he could watch the next scene in which a muscular Hispanic toilet cleaner deflowered another prime example of the blond American surfing dream.

As the video unfolded its stock of porn clichés, Mandy's task was to punish the helplessly pinioned Robert with a strap until his flesh was as red as the endlessly sighing leather of his uniform. He had said the week before that she should 'bleed the red' from him but his words were furtive, without the messianic zeal Alistair used when demanding his hourly share of discipline. So when it came to the point where she had to swing her belt in studded arcs over Robert, Mandy bent her wrist back and forth so that a whipping sound sang through the air. She saw how he twitched beneath the flapping tumult. Even the sound of the belt moving through air was enough to fuse his desire with guilt.

Mandy had not expected homophobia to be the shaping restraint of Robert's life. When they had first met he had appeared wryly sophisticated – even when he said that he would pay her £200 to beat him while he was strapped down and 'forced to watch filthy videos' it had been with a tone of knowing irony. But bound up in his leather suit and hood it was clear that this mummified version of Robert found the idea of gay pornography 'filthy' – it

was the kind of erotic dirt that both aroused and repulsed him.

When she punished Alistair he was always naked, leaving no doubt in her mind that it was him her belt was slashing into. But Robert disappeared into the taut folds of his red outfit. She felt uncertain that it was even him she was standing over with the belt whirling around her head. It would have been easier to lay into a depersonalized homophobic, to send her studs swinging heartlessly into the open flesh of a uniformed figure she had never known; for she had liked Robert's wit from the moment they met and it pained her to think that she should have to hurt him.

She focused on the ominous hood he had stretched over his hidden face to find some well of detachment into which she could sink her raised arm. But then he raised his buttocks with a muffled groan and she caught a flash of his red condom. She couldn't help her shortened laugh as she imagined Robert in his pin-striped suit carefully packing his matching uniform, hood and condom into the Sainsbury's packet he then placed in one of the myriad compartments of his briefcase.

From then on he was Robert to her again and she concentrated more on zipping the belt back expertly so that it merely stung his absurdly expectant posterior. As requested she also abused Robert verbally, switching back and forth between his own desired 'faggot' and 'queer' choices and her improvised 'closet-case' and 'pin-striped prick'. She found it hard at first to sustain this momentum of defamation but the video helped with its ludicrous mix of crusin' and surfin' porn slang and she built up a repartee with the screen. She was unsure how any of this went down with Robert until his stifled moans were finally accompanied by the jerking of his hips against the leather chair. As he at last came with the belt circling above him, Mandy doubted if she'd ever laze on that particular chair in quite the same way again, even though Robert had had the good taste to wear a condom.

After his curious climax, Mandy lent over to loosen him from his manacles. Robert shuffled from the video room with the spotlights still gleaming on the red leather and the slowly drooping, now filled, condom. The video was nearing its end with a mass beach-hut orgy accompanied by an ersatz funk soundtrack which grew louder with each culminating thrust until the star surfer pulled out of his pal's mouth to crank out his 'cum shot', captured in slow-motion replay by the artistic *Surf Butt Bandit* director. Over a freeze-frame of gushing semen, presumably meant to reflect a foaming wave, the video credits rolled. Amidst all the 'Jeffs' and 'Joeys' and 'Johnnys', Mandy was staggered to see that one of the actors was called 'Gregor Samsa', the name of Kafka's own beetle butt bandit in *Metamorphosis*. For her, as the Kafka-loving 'Ms K', this seemed to be post-modernism taken to its most ironic degree. But it left her in dazedly good humour as she waited for Robert to return from the blurred fantasies of his leather world.

Fifteen minutes later she knew she had a satisfied customer. Robert glided into the suitably grey room in his formal financial analyst uniform with a shy smile on his face. He said, 'Thank you, Ms K, thank you,' graciously and shook Mandy warmly by the hand. She tried to talk to Robert about his gay-leather desires and the 'Gregor Samsa' video star but he skilfully evaded her questions. He said that she had been 'just perfect' and that he would see her at the same time the following week. And so another routine was set in place – the only difference being that Robert would appear in a new uniform every other month, with a different colour matched by his perennial hood and condom.

For Mandy, 'compared with Alistair, clients like Robert are bliss. He's obviously got some strange hang-ups but I've always liked Robert. He can be a very witty guy although he doesn't like it much if I kid him about his homophobia. He gets very defensive whenever I try to talk to him about it. When I interviewed him he was excruciatingly embarrassed about describing the service he wanted from

me. He never even hinted that we'd be watching *Surf Butt Bandits* or that he'd be wearing this bottom-squeezing red leather number. He just said that he needed to be beaten whenever he watched these "disgusting" videos. It's the word he uses more than any other when he talks about pornography – "disgusting". But he gets a kind of stilted pleasure from just saying the word.

'Robert was only my fourth client and I was surprised by the uniform and by his homophobia. But I soon loosened up and gave Robert what he wanted – which was more verbal than physical abuse. At first I found it hard to churn out these obscenities. I wanted to counsel him instead and to say sweetly, "It's OK, Robbie, for you to like men. Why don't you just try it instead of getting me to beat you up while you dream about it." But that's not what Robert wants to hear. It's impossible for him to admit that he's gay. When I tried to get back onto the counselling tack by suggesting he go to a gay bar one week instead of visiting me, he said, "Are you out of your mind? Don't you remember that I'm married, that I am a father of three teenage children, that I work with million-pound deals every day. Do you want me to give everything up for a filthy fantasy that afflicts me every now and then?"

'It was almost a poignant moment, even though he chose to use a horrible word like "afflicts". He'd come out of his submissive role and he was the Robert he is outside this house – rigid and uptight about respectability. For him, being gay means certain ruin, the end of everything. He just refuses to even contemplate coming out. By paying me, a woman, a supposedly wrathful woman who's going to sort him out, he thinks he's "dealing" with his desire. Of course he's not – we just continue our merry way week in, week out.

'For Robert, there's such deep shame that he tells me he can't even jack off in front of his own video screen. He has to be punished for his pleasure. But there're still moments of real wit and creativity. I like the matching colour

technique whenever he unveils a new uniform – bottle-green suit and hood, bottle-green condom; baby-blue suit and hood, baby-blue condom; polka-dot suit and hood, polka-dot condom. I think he searched long and hard to find a packet of polka-dot condoms – imported from Scandinavia. He also goes out of his way to find different kinds of leather and PVC contraptions so I'm never really sure what he'll turn up in.

'The same goes with the videos. Sometimes he'll arrive and say I've got a new "Gregor Samsa" video for you. It's for him really but he does go out of his way to hunt down videos with "Gregor Samsa" 'cos he knows how amazed I was that a Californian porn actor would call himself after a Kafka character. With Robert it's the thought that counts. I find it touching in a way. Whereas with Alistair our S&M sessions are built on nothing but brutality . . .'

The way Mandy spoke about Robert provided further shifts in my perceptions of prostitution. Whenever she saw Robert it was obvious that he was more the 'victim' than her. Although there was hurt in Mandy's separation from love, in her apartness from people existing outside her 'house of pain', it was Robert who needed help.

Mandy's revelations of her differing S&M sessions with Alistair and Robert also pointed to the fact that prostitution in Britain is patterned with themes of bondage and fantasy, repression and role-reversal. Sex, especially amongst the professional clientele, is often merely an introductory gesture or a vague after-thought to the more urgent currents of guilt and retribution.

Although I could make a cerebral linkage between Alistair's misogyny and his culpable need for punishment, as well as between Robert's homophobia and disappearance into leather-cased anonymity, I felt emotional incomprehension whenever I tried to imagine myself wanting to either whip or be whipped. Having had a life so far devoid of sado-masochistic fantasies I alternated between feeling smugly self-congratulatory at my supposed normality and

then mildly disappointed in my comparatively mind-numbingly dull sex-life – with not even a single manacle, studded belt, leather cat-suit or polka-dot condom to remember.

'Of course it's gonna seem strange to you at first,' Mandy remarked, 'because it *is* strange. S&M goes to the root of people's darkest fears and desires. It's about domination and submission, about control and abandonment, about pleasure and pain. These boundaries are closer than you think and they blur in the mind rather than in the body. That's where this extreme strangeness comes in, with the mind. But that's what also makes some of it so fascinating.

'Most of the clients I see need mental rather than physical relief. There's a morass of contradictions inside them and they come here, in a way, to recover some sort of clarity, some kind of balance. Even Alistair. It's a mistake to try and just conjure up an overview from the start. These S&M desires are deeply personal – they come out of people's bruised psyches. One wants to have me walk over his face in six-inch heels, another wants to be flogged, another wrapped up tight in a uniform, someone else only wants verbal rather than physical abuse. The reasons for each desire are different and they can shift as well.

'What my S&M service seems to do is provide a framing device for confronting these men's unnameable longings. They choose the frame, they set the limits and I play their game in the persona they most fantasize about. I don't really feel I'm curing anyone of their repression because, for the most part, the S&M fantasies stay unchanged year after year. But I attract a particular kind of client, I guess . . .'

Then, I felt it was time for me to branch out of Mandy's blue room and to hear from some of these masochistic clients themselves. As tarnished as he already was in my own mind, I knew that I would have to test this grotesque image of Alistair against a personal encounter.

When I suggested this to Mandy she almost seemed to growl a low 'No!' rebuke.

'Why not?' I asked.

'You're not ready for Alistair yet – you're still a baby when it comes to dealing with someone like *him*.'

Of course she was right and although I tried to feign an air of hard-boiled mockery at her maternal 'baby' tag, I was mightily relieved when she suggested I start with Robert instead. There was plenty of time for Alistair – he was out there, somewhere, not even dreaming, as I was, of a clash between us one day.

It has always been difficult to break through the anonymity shielding the consumers of prostitution. This became apparent during Mandy Kavanagh's ensuing weeks of negotiation with Robert. He listened to her talking about me while slipping back into his 'married financial analyst with three children and 7-series BMW' mould. Although he trusted her implicitly, having been a client without any trouble for nearly four years, Robert was riddled with anxiety at the prospect of meeting me. Visions of tabloid-infested scandal haunted him.

Mandy tried a variety of charming and domineering techniques to persuade him to phone me. Even though he contorted his sexuality further by telling Mandy that he was 'half in love' with her, Robert refused to make any contact with me. Considering the history of scandal smearing prostitution in Britain, neither Mandy nor I felt able to question his logic. Tradition has determined that it is always the client, and never the prostitute, who receives the luxury of anonymity. It is inevitably the woman who is exposed in the dock, while the man's name is protected. This, it is said, is in the interests of his family and career, a sensitivity from which the prostitute never benefits. Despite the lucidity of Mandy's stories I could not forget that, in the world outside, prostitution is the dirty old 'p' word. The stench of its stigma is meant to stick to the whores only. So we accepted Robert's refusal with some resignation. I even felt a little foolish in half-expecting that he might have spoken to me.

But a few days later, Mandy called to say that Robert had had a sudden change of heart – he would meet me the following afternoon, the day of his next appointment. He had given no reason to her for the shift and so I arrived at her home once more not knowing what to expect. She also looked nervous when she opened the door and whispered that he was waiting upstairs, in the video room, where we would do the interview prior to his changing for their latest 'Gregor Samsa' session.

Mandy held my hand tightly as we walked up the stairs together. She was worried that Robert might be getting the wrong idea about her mild liking for him. His garbled declaration of love for her the previous week had unsettled her. As with all prostitutes, it was imperative that her clients' emotions were kept sufficiently in check to avoid any 'unnecessary confusion'.

Robert was evidently seeing me as an affectionate favour to Mandy. All kinds of compromising situations sprang to mind as she knocked gently on the pale grey door. There was no answer from inside the room. After a slight hesitation she opened the door and walked inside, only to stop in mid-step so that I almost careered into her. She swallowed a gasp of surprise and said, as neutrally as she could, 'Why, Robert, you've changed already . . .'

Through his eye slits, Robert must have seen a comical sight. Mandy, all arched eyebrows and pursed lips, hovered uncertainly around the gaping statue that once was me. Robert wore a black leather cat-suit which had a broad gold zip running up the middle from crotch level right into his shiny black hood. The thought crawled across my mind that if this was *only* Robert then how much worse could Alistair possibly be? It looked as if his head was split into two sides by the zip and could be peeled apart to reveal a hideous face of flesh. Having once been a delinquent fan of the manic 'Leatherface' in *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre*, it seemed a cruel come-uppance that I should be turned to stone by a financial analyst in a South Kensington video den. As the

black hood shone a few feet from me, it was as if 'Leatherface' had been brought back from the grave into awesome life.

Yet instead of the whirring whine of a chainsaw blade, Mandy's composed voice cut through the silence. She drew Robert by his black leather glove towards me and said, 'I think you two had better meet after all this time. Robert, this is my friend I told you about . . .' 'Leatherface' and I exchanged stiff handshakes and he made a muffled grunting noise in reply to my inappropriate 'Hello, how're you?' greeting.

As even I could see, Robert was not doing too well within his creaking leather encasement. His breath hissed painfully from the small round hole covering his mouth as he tried to drag air down these suffocating confines. He gestured painfully to the 'Lazy-Boy' couch which was still in its upright position. Mandy interpreted this as an indication that I should sit there while Robert leaned awkwardly against the wall opposite. She retreated tactfully, saying she'd wait in her room until we had finished our interview.

I stared into this hooded nightmare of gurgles, relieved that he hadn't shown me the extent of his colour co-ordination by whipping out a black condom-clad penis. Perhaps that was yet to come. Noticing my discomfort Robert made a guttural series of noises which I could only manage to answer with an apologetic 'Pardon?' He repeated himself with a sound that emerged as a disconcerting mix of a gargling Teutonic hum and a crackling death-rattle.

Trying to remind myself that this was meant to be my first exclusive interview with a significant consumer of high-class prostitution, I suggested to the supposedly submissive Robert that he move a little closer to my chair and speak more slowly through the thick leather hood. He inched forward towards me until I could feel the heat rising from the shining black surface. He spoke again and the noise broke from him with intimate fury, more incomprehensible than ever.

In desperation I nodded sagely. 'Robert,' I said pleasantly, 'do you mind just nodding either yes or no to my first few questions?' Robert shrugged his shoulders, a stifled movement which set off ripples of light across the smooth black surface.

And so off we went with a series of nods either up and down or from side to side. Robert's hood revealed that while Mandy was not the first prostitute he had visited she was the most satisfactory Dominatrix he had yet encountered. He now had no need to visit any other prostitute and his wife, with a vigorous shake, most certainly did not know where he spent his late Thursday afternoons. While he gave a shaky no-yes-no answer as to whether he enjoyed pornography, he was emphatically clear that he was not gay but that he did deserve punishment from Mandy's belt.

Thinking that we were proceeding swimmingly I decided to delve further into this more complex area of sado-masochistic uniform sex. Did he feel simultaneously more secure and more excited behind his anonymous black mask? An affirmative nod was quickly followed by a long burst of black zipper talk which I had to ask him to repeat. Robert released an equally indecipherable series of tortuous exclamations.

Not having the heart to go through the entire process again I asked Robert, seeing that his anonymity was assured by the uniform and that there was a 'slight distortion' of his voice behind the hood, if he would mind if I taped our conversation. After a few wavering moments, the hood shook from side to side and so I placed the recorder between us in the hope that I would be able to make some sense of Robert's speech when replaying the tape later on Mandy's monstrously high-definition speakers.

A bizarre half-hour followed. I reeled off a list of prepared questions to each of which Robert delivered a thick gush of crackles and hisses. I reverted to my sensitive nodding technique at the end of Bob's every burst of hooded

noise without understanding more than one word here and there – 'Ms K', 'belt', 'leather', 'hood' and 'video' – to reassure myself that we were still on the right track. Eventually, worn down by my own nods and futile efforts to keep up with Robert's strangulated voice I shook him by the glove, thanked him for his time and assured him that his secrets were safe with me.

As I shut the door behind me and sank against the wall in fatigue I heard the video begin with the unmistakable thud of a pornographic soundtrack. Trying to block out the thought of 'Leatherface' reaching for his black condom I walked down the passage to Mandy's serene blue room. She was rocking in her usual chair, reading, and as I walked in she looked up hopefully.

'How did it go?' she asked.

'Don't ask.'

'Why?'

I slipped the tape into her cassette desk and wound it back a few minutes. The room resounded with the sound of Robert's leathery chainsaw voice. It reverberated from her speakers with a bizarre ferment of sighs, moans and grunting growls.

'But that's like the noise he makes when he's jerking off to Gregor Samsa,' murmured Mandy thoughtfully. 'Whatever did you ask him?'

Before I could answer her, my own recorded voice burbled through the speakers. 'Yes I see,' I lied. I imagined myself nodding furiously. 'But why do you want to feel pain so badly, Bob?' My voice sounded terrible in such definition and I squirmed while Mandy laughed – 'You called him "Bob"? I'm sure he went for that in a big way . . .'

We listened to Bob going for it in his own ubiquitous way as a twisted stream of white noise whined from his mouth before lowering itself into the sound of a rubbish truck grinder.

Mandy was still laughing, her own words struggling to be heard as she said, 'Welcome to the secret world of sado-

masochism, boy. This is what £200 an hour sounds like. But, baby, how're you ever gonna understand the language of bondage?'

Even though my comprehension of that language was still in its infancy, I could no longer fail to acknowledge the power impacted into its rituals. Standing alone in the silent 'Terminator Angel' basement a few days later I imagined I could hear the excruciating intensity shaping the language of S&M. As if lost in a chamber of horror, I listened for an echo of the cries I knew had reverberated from one white wall to another. The more I strained to penetrate the sound-proofed cellar the deeper its concentrated silence began to hum. In my head that hum slowly mutated into the faint din of pain that must have been felt by the men on the black leather and gleaming metal apparatus set diagonally opposite each other.

The convex mounting-couch where Alistair spent much of his hour between three and four every Tuesday afternoon stood in the far corner so that it was the first object to be seen when the door swung open. Across the full expanse of the cellar's twenty-square-foot cement floor, an even more imposing contraption demanded attention. Like an eight-foot-high metal doorway, embellished with a complicated system of pulleys and chains, this innovative stretching rack had been constructed by one of Mandy's former clients, an engineering genius. He liked to dangle from his steely invention for twenty minutes at a time, occasionally requesting that 'Madame M' should either spin him round or lash him with one of her whips. When he left London for a high-paying academic post in America he had to abandon his rack. Not having much use for it any more, 'Madame M' rarely oiled its complicated cranking system and so its effectiveness had rusted slightly in the two years which had passed since the creator's departure.

In less hi-tech mode, a long wooden rack filled most of the adjoining wall. Mandy sometimes used it not only to

manacle an expectantly submissive client but also to house her assortment of shiny boots, belts, chains, handcuffs, hoods, rods and whips. Surrounded by this full range of bondage paraphernalia, reflected in the large revolving mirrors standing in the two remaining corners of the cellar, it was perhaps inevitable that I felt intimidated.

I had not been on my own there for more than ten minutes when I heard Mandy and Alice Teague walking down the stairs to the basement. It felt as though they were dispensing the surreal relief visitors must bring to a prison. While the two of them had been upstairs looking at Mandy's chic Nicole Farhi and Pam Hogg wardrobe, I had ambled down ahead of them. But where I had seen only grim retribution they both found touches of levity in this, to them, familiar place of bondage. Mandy was dressed in an incongruous sun dress and sandals while Alice wore a more apt outfit of thigh-length boots, a leather mini-skirt and jacket whose blackness was offset by the bright pink of her halter-neck top and the inevitable ribbons in her hair. If Mandy, with her sun-glasses perched on top of her head, looked like she was heading for a picnic, Alice appeared set for an infinitely more rousing encounter.

'Oh yeah, kids,' she sighed as she strode across the cellar, 'this is like coming home! Mmmmhmmmm! Not bad! Pretty nifty in fact – do you have them face up or down on this?' she asked Mandy as she stroked Alistair's convex couch.

'Down – unless they've been acting worse than usual,' Mandy replied softly.

'That figures,' said Alice distractedly as her attention fixed on the line of whips wedged into the wooden rack. 'Yes, oh yes, "Crystal", you've got some great stuff here. I've used most of these in my time. You only seem to be missing some of those huge sets of forceps . . .'

'Somehow, I've never needed to use them,' Mandy said, smiling reassuringly at me in the huddled shadow of the stretching rack corner.

'Aahaaa! Here we are! This is what I've been looking for!'

Alice exclaimed as she picked out a thin whip which made a whippity-whappity sound as she flexed it back and forth through the air. 'I used to be brilliant with one of these – even if I say so myself!' Providing the proof of this, she went through a drum-majorette twirl which rolled into a series of clipped kung-fu jabs and chops before, with an apocalyptic cry, she brought the whip crashing down into the leather couch. 'Yes! Kinky Karate Kat! I like this one!' she almost whispered in confirmation as she slipped off her leather jacket and lovingly curved the whip back in both hands. Finding the mirror-prop she had used in her own bondage work Alice entertained us for a few more minutes. She sent the whip whistling round her while watching herself closely in the mirror for any false moves. 'This your favourite whip too?' she asked Mandy when she'd worked up a light sheen of sweat.

'Oh yeah! I've always been a bendy-girl!'

'Me too – definitely! You can't beat a bendy for fun! It's those short truncheon type monsters I never liked using. With a bendy you always feel you can control things a little better. Are most of your "johns" bendies too?'

'About a third, I'd say. But I've got as many into the belt as the whip,' answered Mandy.

'The belt's OK, I guess. I just go for this bendy-type noise more!' To reward herself, Alice produced a particularly ferocious set of swishing slashes through the air which left her breathing quickly. 'Whew, you tend to forget that this gives you a better work-out than any kind of aerobics class!' As she reluctantly replaced the whip in its proper place on the wall Alice, as if in an afterthought, asked, 'You got lots of "sniffy-tasties"?'

'Two, I'd say. I seem to attract more of the "dressie-feelies" . . .'

' "Sniffy-tasties"? "Dressie-feelies"?' I asked helplessly.

'Fetishists, sweetheart,' Alice murmured kindly. As she had travelled across town to ensure that I was 'making progress' with 'The Terminator Angel', Alice was glad to

be able to help out further with a child's guide to the diversity of fetishism. 'Basically, at least in my experience, there're two kinds of kinkies. The "sniffy-tasties" are, as you can probably guess, into bodily functions. The simplest "tasties" can be kinda cute. I had this one guy who could only get off by giving me head when he'd smeared strawberry yogurt inside me. He never actually wanted to fuck me. Yogurt was his thing until he wanted to graduate to ice-cream. *That's* when I said we'd have to part company. Otherwise, the "tasties" are more into being given "golden showers". I enjoyed a few big earners having to pee into some "tastie's" mouth. Not really my style, actually. I always thought it was a bit degrading having to squat and pee over someone. Sometimes I'd get all blocked and couldn't pee so I was glad I didn't get asked too often. And I didn't like the "sniffies" much either. I don't particularly want *anyone* sniffing my used knickers even if they offer a lot of money! Luckily, I was also much more appealing to the "dressie-feelies", anyway! It made life easier 'cos those leather and rubber and plastic boys are always most interested in their uniforms and the way it rubs against their skin. I didn't have to work too hard with them. I actually thought most of it was a bit of a giggle rather than just work – which is the way it should be, I think. What do you think, "Angel"?'

'Well, my painter client with the fruit-fetish makes me laugh. And so does my foot-sniffer!'

'Yeah, I always liked feet-guys,' Alice smiled fondly. 'They're often very shy and sensitive . . .'

'And always respectful!'

'You bet they are! Jeez, I dunno, this is making me nostalgic!'

'Do you miss it?' Mandy asked Alice curiously.

'Yeah, I do. The only thing I don't miss is the sneering of some goody two-shoes who thinks she's better than me 'cos I'm a whore. You know a few months before I gave up I went to this swanky dinner-party. Real *Late Show* types

– my kind of people as it turns out – and we were chattering about this and that – Salman Rushdie, Algeria, boycotting The Body Shop, Charter 88, Miles Davis, whatever. Now don't you two laugh – it's true! Then this one woman, this fucking advertising floozie, leans over the table and she says, "and what *exactly* do *you* do?" Now my friend knows what I do and, normally, I would've just lied and said I was a "designer" or a "model". But this snooty little madam got to me. I just looked her in the eye and said quietly, "I'm a prostitute!" '

'That's great!' laughed Mandy.

'Well that's what I thought at the time. It sure shut her up! But it made everyone else terribly uneasy and my friend felt so embarrassed. She kept trying to steer the conversation on to safer ground. She kept saying, "Anyone for some more Pavlova?"'

While Alice acted out the remembered serving of copious helpings of Pavlova, Mandy couldn't resist asking, 'What happened then?'

'It back-fired on me basically. I started to feel terrible and I left early, long before anyone else. The ad exec gave me a stiff handshake and a sneer before she called out "Good luck!" in this fucking sing-song voice. I know I shouldn't have let someone like her get to me but she did. She made me feel ashamed and I got angry – more with myself than her because I was usually proud to be a prostitute . . .'

'Well it's a more interesting and useful job than an ad exec's . . .'

'You bet it is!' said Alice with renewed zest.

'But that's not why you gave up being a prostitute, is it, Alice? Because of people like her?' Mandy asked.

'*Never!* I just wanted to do something different for a while.'

'Uuuuh, I don't mean to lower the tone of this conversation . . .' I began slowly, '. . . but going back to these fetishists . . .'

'Yes, kinky,' Alice said slyly. 'I thought you might be a

bit of an enigma. Are you a "sniffy-tastie" in disguise, maybe? Naaah – maybe not. What do you want to know, kinky?'

'Well I was wondering about the feet-fetishists. Do they worship the foot because they see it as the ultimate submission?'

'Yeah, that's certainly part of it – but the bottom-line's a bit more basic than that. It's the smell that most of them go for – don't you think so Mandy?'

'I wouldn't know – my feet *never* smell!' Mandy said lightly.

'Oh yes they do! At least more than your hands do! The odour's everything for these guys! Can you imagine a "sniffy" hand-fetishist?'

'I quite like looking at women's hands,' I ventured in a vain attempt to live up to my new 'kinky' tag.

'You said "eyes" last week!' Mandy laughed.

'And I've seen you looking at legs too!' Alice exclaimed triumphantly.

'Well aren't "kinkies" supposed to be versatile?' I asked as I backed into my stretching-rack corner.

'No! It's just the opposite!' said Alice. 'The whole point for the fetishist is that, for him, only certain parts of the body or inanimate objects are exciting. If you're a pure rubber fetishist then you've got to get into your uniform to really get a thrill. If you're into feet you're not bothered much about the vagina. Now I'm not usually big on all that Freudian stuff, but with my fetishists the obsession began when they were really young. All my guys felt a lack of love when they were babies or young kids. So they transferred their affections to something that gave them more comfort – a rubber duck, a high-heeled teacher, a nurse, whatever. It's a bit like Pavlov's dogs – you know, whenever they heard a bell being rung they went crazy 'cos they associated it with being fed. It's the same with sexual responses sometimes. A guy gets locked into this one fantasy he had as a nine-year-old – he got the hots for his teacher then

and she wore red shoes. So this stays with him and whenever he sees someone wearing red shoes, the bell still rings and he goes "boing!"'

'But what about severe domination – when people need to get flogged?' asked Mandy. Both Alice and I knew she was thinking of Alistair.

'Shit, I'm not the psychological expert I'm pretending to be! Maybe as a kid you get cuddled and given a cookie after you've been smacked and you make that association. Maybe it's the feeling of having someone interested in a bare part of your body. That explains the bottom-spankers. But, fuck, when it comes to darker stuff you start talking a different language. You start saying words like "guilt" and "loathing" and "degradation" . . . it's not so much of a giggle then . . .'

'I know,' said Mandy as the room went quieter and we all felt a tug of the pain bound up in that more tangled language. 'It's frightening sometimes to even think about it and that's why I wonder about Simone; I wonder if she really knows how deep and dark that place can get . . .?'

Chapter Three

Languages of Loving, Screaming and Boot-licking

French, Czech, Italian, English and Swedish words rolled off Simone Maillard's tongue with soft-accented fluidity. When she was alone the words looped around each other as if they belonged to a sixth language which only made sense inside her own head. She sometimes caught herself thinking in that curiously musical composite. It took a while then to remember which language she had been using before the boundaries blurred and other words slipped in from different places out of her past.

Switching from one language to another Simone still remembered, at arbitrary moments, the time when her tongue felt thick and useless inside a sulky mouth. She had been just a little girl then, in her first year of school. The laughter of the others whenever she tried to say their strange words made a cruel sound, a sound she had never forgotten.

Although born in Paris, just across the river from Nôtre Dame, she moved with her family to Prague when her father was transferred there as a diplomat. She was six years old then, in 1965. Her parents decided that she should enrol in one of the better Czech schools. While they would ensure the development of her French at home, the school would offer Simone the opportunity of learning a new language.

For nine months she tried to speak as little Czech as possible. She preferred to nod or shake her head, or merely to shrug. That way she could avoid at least some of the sniggering which accompanied her rudimentary attempts at

Czech speech in the playground. While her classmates skipped in the street after school, she sat at the wooden kitchen table with her mother as they translated her Czech homework into French and then back again.

That hour with her mother was the happiest of every day; and with each passing week it became obvious that Simone was gradually taking over the role of language teacher. When she found herself able to laugh, gently, at her mother's struggling Czech pronunciation Simone knew that she was nearly there.

Then came that glorious half-hour during the end of year Czech test when she sat quietly over her paper and filled in the correct word next to every picture. When the ruddy-faced teacher made a speech the next day in praise of Simone, 'now a true Czech girl', for finishing at the top of the class she found herself propelled to unimagined heights of popularity. The girls in her class offered her boiled sweets while the boys pushed each other around whenever they saw her looking at them. Suddenly, language, for Simone, meant pleasure rather than pain.

They left Prague for Rome in 1968, just after the Soviet tanks had crushed Dubček's Spring Uprising. Despite the tears she felt exhilarated at the thought of starting all over again with a new language. After the rigours of Czech, Italian came easily to her. Within a year she was revelling in its richness and even outswearing the thirteen-year-old boys who would call her all kinds of names while she fed her favourite stray cat at the top end of their new road.

After two sun-filled years in Rome, the Maillards returned to Paris. Her Czech and Italian experiences had left her with the barest trace of an unusual French accent. Rather than trying to eradicate this exoticism she strived to maintain her links with other languages by writing to her friends in Rome and, less often, in beleaguered Prague. At the same time she had uncovered two new passions – English and, more urgently, teenage boys. She did well with both and the years flashed by until she was reading English literature at the

Sorbonne and living with her lover, a student from London, in the Marais district.

Simone followed him to London after they both qualified in 1980. She has been there ever since, even though she left her boyfriend not long after they arrived. Simone decided to take a French philosophy degree at London University. It was there that she met Mandy Kavanagh who had made a similar decision the year before.

'I was a little frightened of her at first,' Simone remembered in her inevitably immaculate English. 'She stood out from everyone else. Even then her reputation was, you know, *formidable*. I always watched out for her. But it was only later, after we had both finished with philosophy, that I got to know her well. Not long after that she became a prostitute and, well, I guess you know the rest – she is *L'Ange Terminator* and I am *La Chienne de Souffrance* . . .'

With a delicately raised eyebrow Simone called herself more directly then, in English, ' "The Bitch Of Pain", of "Suffering" if you like.' She was a small, pretty woman and when she wore her large owl-like glasses for reading it was hard to imagine anyone looking less like a Dominatrix. Instead, she appeared more like a personification of Parisian academia. Before becoming *La Chienne de Souffrance*, Simone had worked as a freelance translator of academic journals from French into English, Italian and Czech. She was good at her job but the supply of translation work was both inconsistent and poorly paid. Eventually, Simone chose to follow Mandy into prostitution – as one highly qualified university graduate after another.

But there was a further, more telling, irony. Simone Maillard, the elegant technician of language, was made voiceless by the change in her work. After all, what words could she reach for when she pressed a burning poker down onto the flesh of a man's inner thigh? What could she say, even silently to herself, when she threaded a needle through the nipple of another? In the terrible wake of their bellowing

and shrieking, with sounds coming from their flapping mouths which would not have been out of place in an abattoir, Simone was struck dumb. She felt her tongue wagging hopelessly, like a bloodied stump, near the back of her mouth. Then she thought back to those earliest days in Prague when she was also despairingly lost between languages.

Her mind, like her heart, froze when she heard the men's screaming. She was stunned by the fact that it was their choice to suffer. Simone struggled to find the resilience to go through the process each new time; particularly as the screeching from the time before made it seem like the top of her head had been ripped open. But numbness also emerged as her prime source of endurance whenever she confronted her most arduous clients.

'To be able to do this kind of work,' Simone almost whispered with weariness, 'you don't have to be cruel, you don't have to be a bitch. I don't ever really think of myself as "The Bitch of Pain". If I did I would go crazy. So to stay sane you have to remember your own reasons for doing this work. You have to block everything else out. I block out language first of all, because if you have language then you are going to want to look for meaning; and I'm not sure how much clear meaning you could ever find in this kind of S&M.

'With a lot of the men I see, everything begins and ends with the scream. That sound says it all. No word is ever as articulate as a scream. For them pain is everything, language is nothing. So my mind empties and I do what they ask me to do. And if there are no words for me, a linguist, then there can be no names for any feelings I might have. So I am remote when I have a needle or a poker in my hand; I am empty when I do this work . . .'

Simone said these words with such ragged fervour that I felt certain that nothing could have been more difficult for her to do than to drain herself of feeling. Even though I had only met her earlier that day, she had spoken tenderly

about her parents and Mandy, about Prague and Rome and about her enduring love for language. It must have been a pitiless struggle to nullify these emotions within prostitution's most extreme domain.

Mandy Kavanagh had told me nothing about Simone before I met her apart from the fact that they were friends and sometimes worked together as prostitutes. It was only after I had heard Simone's personal history from her own mouth that I realized the significance of Mandy's restraint. She had realized that Simone was ready to talk; and so Mandy allowed her friend to tell her story in her own way.

She began, naturally, with her childhood; and so there was the grace of accuracy in Simone's account of the way in which sado-masochism can transgress existing boundaries of behaviour and language. Against the backdrop of her persistent search for new words ever since Prague, Simone's inarticulacy in the face of her clients' screams assumed a rare poignancy. In becoming a mute technician of punishment, Simone had given up what had once mattered most to her. She had learnt to dominate language so that it became a reservoir of, as she said, 'pleasure rather than pain'. Her life had been defined by language and then, instead, it became reshaped by wordless mutilation.

Before we sat down to speak in the bare room where Simone worked, she had shown me around the old maisonette she and her boyfriend, Kyle Johannsen, rented in the least gentrified quarter of Clapham. The flat was filled with books and ceiling-high piles of paper – 'The place of words,' Simone said – and only the very top and bottom rooms were empty of books. Kyle painted in the attic, which he had converted into a studio, while Simone worked in the cellar.

Her place of punishment lacked the professional conventions of Mandy's basement. There was only a wooden table in the middle of the room, a fire grate and chimney and a small reprint of Edvard Munch's painting, *The Scream*. It was a simultaneously ironic and disturbing picture

to pin against the wall of her *Chienne de Souffrance* room. In the painting a whitened, disembodied face screams with suffering which appears almost unknowable; except perhaps to Simone and her men as they went about their unspoken business.

'It's one of Kyle's favourite paintings,' she said. 'He thought it would be a nice touch to hang it here. I think it's a very powerful painting but I find it scary to look at some days. But still, better that than a torture rack! The men like it too, for it says everything about them and this place – in a way words could never do. Look at it and you'll imagine the sounds I sometimes hear . . .'

It was hard to drag my eyes away from the painting. Yet, having done the screaming routine in Mandy's dungeon, I was more interested in trying to find out why Simone had chosen this type of Dominatrix work, where branding and piercing were the specialized components. As if sensing my question, and much to my relief, she suggested we move instead to the living room. There, she suggested, she would feel more expressive.

This room gave off a warm, lived-in feeling. Old leather-backed armchairs and a beautiful Louis XIV chaise-longue provided a comfortable resting point for Simone's collection of five heavily overweight cats. They appeared to do little apart from sleep and devour tinned Salmon Gourmet, with only an occasional night-time chase of clawing activity up the room's ochre-coloured curtains for exercise. Everywhere you looked there were paintings, full of wild splashes of colour, and books overflowing from wooden cases.

'This is our room – mine and Kyle's,' Simone said with softness opening up her face. 'I'm sure it must look untidy to everyone else but I love it. There's nothing I like more than coming in here, alone with Kyle and the cats, after the money has been earned and the day is over.'

This mention of money gave me the unsubtle opportunity to ask Simone about the exact motivation behind her

conversion from academic translation. Was it just for money that she worked as a Dominatrix?

'The aim is to make money, sure! I wouldn't be doing this if the money wasn't so good – I can promise you *that*! I can make up to £1,000 an hour for the hardest bondage work. To earn that as a translator I would have to work day and night for two months probably!'

While £500 a month is not much to live on in London, I wondered if she ever thought back nostalgically to her poorer days. Did she not sometimes envy her own past freedom – freedom, that is, from the emotional price she has to pay while inflicting chronic pain on others?

'But it's not *me* who is really doing that to them. I numb myself so that when I am out of there, the cellar, I forget it. It's like any job you don't like much – when the day is done you shut your mind to it. You get on with your other life.'

This distinction between 'real' and 'fake' selves is tenuous at the best of times. Comparing the violence of her prostitution with her own private history, where identity was inextricably bound up in empathy with language, it seemed a particularly difficult trick for Simone to pull off irrespective of how rigorously detached she claimed to be as *La Chienne de Souffrance*. How certain could she ever be that her 'true', compassionate personality would remain iced over in the cellar and that her 'counterfeit' 'Bitch Of Pain' persona would stay locked away when she was with Kyle?

'You're right. I can never be certain. It's too complicated to always be sure that you're in control. With Kyle I don't feel I have too many problems in switching the Dominatrix side off – I am too in love with him to ever let that happen. It's in the cellar that the problems start. I'm not very good at hurting people. The men all say that I should be tougher with them. But I can't. I hear their pain and, even though they say this gives them pleasure, I draw back. I only go so far. It's not that I'm squeamish about pain – how could

I be doing this work? It's just that I draw the line at a certain point. And of course it is me, Simone, and not *La Chienne de Souffrance*, who steps back. In that sense, yes, the real me, *la compatissante*, is in the cellar then and I can stand it no longer.'

Yet all this talk of compassion only accentuated my own uncertainties. I trotted out what must have been a familiar line to Simone – that I didn't feel I would ever be able to bear a girlfriend of mine working as a prostitute, let alone in the area of severe domination where she found the work so disturbing.

'Look, that's OK,' she said sweetly. 'I never imagined once that I would be doing this work and Kyle never thought that he would be with someone who was a Dominatrix in her spare time. But things change and you adapt according to circumstances.'

'What has changed for you?' I asked

'I found love – it's as simple as that.'

'How exactly does *love* lead you to this kind of pain?'

'You know, for a lot of prostitutes love has nothing to do with their work. If anything, it is the lack of love in their past lives which makes them sell sex. Even Mandy – that was surprising to you, no? Mandy is my favourite woman in the whole world – a role model for me in many ways. Except when it comes to love. As beautiful as she is she can't give herself to love a man in the way that I love Kyle. And that is sad. I think she is maybe too strong for her own good. With me it's different; I'm doing this out of love, it's one way forward for me and Kyle, for us to change our lives . . .'

'What does Mandy think of your relationship with Kyle?' I wondered hesitantly.

'That,' she sighed, 'you must ask her. I don't think she understands our love in a way.'

'Is that because she doesn't like Kyle?'

'Did she say that to you?' she said sharply.

'No, she told me nothing except that you were a very good friend to her.'

'And so she is to me – *certainement*!'

'What does Kyle do – apart from painting?'

'Well, you know, painting is Kyle. That's what he is – a painter. And I think he is going to be a very great painter. We're hoping he'll be able to put on an exhibition soon.'

'So that's why you took up domination – to enable Kyle to paint full-time – out of love for him?'

'Yes.'

'But can't Kyle find a part-time job and paint during the rest of the time?'

'Our life before this was not too good,' Simone reasoned. 'I was making nothing as a translator. Kyle was working in a pizza restaurant every day. He would come home exhausted. How could he paint then, at night, when he would have to be up again the next day to make those awful deep-pan pizzas?'

I suggested that it had been done before – many times, perhaps even with deep-pan pizzas.

'But we didn't want to struggle for the rest of our lives. One burst of the work I now do can change our lives. It's important to me, too, that Kyle succeeds as a painter. When his work goes badly then we go badly. He doesn't like the fact I do this work but he accepts it. We decided together that I would do it while he concentrated fully on his painting.'

'And what about your career, Simone?'

'Being a translator is not much of a career – it's not exactly work to give your whole life up to. It's hard to do and it's badly paid.'

'At least it was *your* work.'

'Maybe – but Kyle is more important to me than translation. I wouldn't do this for any man. I'm doing this for us – me and Kyle. That's also why I do this type of prostitution. It has little sex in it. I have never ever fucked a man for money. I don't even do blow jobs. How could I – when I love another man, a man who is my lover?'

'But still,' I plodded on, 'isn't it damaging both to you,

personally, and to your relationship with Kyle when you come upstairs after branding a man on his inner thigh?'

'There're two answers to that. First, if you don't allow penetration as a prostitute then you already know that you're calling for a hardcore kink audience. It is hard to deal with – but the money is great. I earn more than Mandy for a single session and she is much more beautiful and skilled than me. But Mandy refuses to do piercing or branding. I refuse to do sex. That's why we have different types of men and why I have only six regulars. My service is for the most unusual, if you like – and there are just enough of them to keep us living well.

'Secondly, you must keep the work in context. Only two out of six regulars want real pain. The branding man only comes every few months and he does not always want to be branded. That has only happened twice in eighteen months. He pays me £1,000 for an hour-long dance and whipping session which ends with me branding him for a few moments. Another client likes to have his nipples and his cock pierced. That is clinical work – I am like a nurse then. He says it hardly hurts the way I do it! The rest of them are much more like Mandy's men – it's fantasy and pretend-punishment . . .'

It still sounded grim to me and, sensing this, Simone strove to change the tenor of our conversation.

'But, *mon cher*, it's not all terrible. I have this one wonderful man – "Maxwell Montague" is what he calls himself. He comes to see me every second Friday and every time he comes to the door I know that he has made a new uniform for himself. He is like Vivienne Westwood or Gaultier to me! He is so imaginative. He makes dresses and capes for himself out of anything and everything. Leather, rubber, tin foil, rubbish bags, light bulbs, flowers, fruit, metal, tyres, whatever! I'm telling you this man is a genius sometimes. Dali would have loved him! All he wants is to model for me while I go, "Ooolala, Maxie, who's a clever boy then?" Then, after a while, I must

wrap clingfilm tightly around him so that he can hardly move.'

'Clingfilm?'

'*Voila*, clingfilm! It is the womb-like feeling. Then he licks my boots and tells me he worships me. Before I know it he has come and he scurries away like a little church mouse so that he can get working on his next outfit.'

'He sounds like an unusual sort of guy,' I said politely. 'Why do you think he goes for this particular kind of layered fantasy?'

'Who knows? But he is very talented in his own way. I like him.'

Although memories of Robert were still fresh in my mind, I wondered if Simone thought she could arrange a meeting between me and 'Maxie' to at least see some of his outfits.

'Oh no, Maxie is very secretive, I'm sorry. There's no chance he would ever see you. But I think you should meet Kyle – maybe he can answer better than me some of these questions you've been asking. What do you think?'

What could I do but murmur agreement? There was more than ample evidence that Simone loved Kyle deeply. To decline a meeting with him would be to offend her in the most personal way. But that still did not undermine the feelings I had at the thought of talking to him. I had already dismissed Kyle as the post-modernist equivalent of a 'bounder'. It also struck me as a peculiar aberration that the first man I should meet face to face – Robert's leather hood having precluded him from that honour – in the course of writing this book should fall outside the ritualised 'p' zone of punter, pimp or prostitute.

Despite these reservations, I succumbed to a sneaking susceptibility that this might not be such a bad idea after all. In the few days which passed between my first meeting with Simone and a second visit to Clapham, I was haunted by a comment she had made with illusory casualness. At this early stage in our friendship, as she warmly described what I would have then probably called a 'liaison', she asked

me to be careful in talking about her and Kyle to other people. I made a flippant comment that it was probably a conversation-stopper at a Clapham party to admit that you worked as 'The Bitch Of Pain'. 'Oh no,' she said demurely, 'it's not that. We don't have any problem in talking about what I do. I'm not ashamed – it's just that Kyle and I could go to jail for living together. That's this ridiculous British sex law for you!'

Kyle might be some kind of rogue but it did not seem right that his living with Simone, who loved him, should be an offence technically more serious than rape. In the eyes of British law, Simone and Kyle were running a brothel and he was living off her immoral earnings. The fact that he might be exploiting her did not appear to enter the judicial equation; instead it was the supposed 'immorality' of Simone working as a prostitute in the house where she lived with another person which tipped the scales in favour of their being certified as 'criminals'. I knew Simone was even less like a criminal than she was a cruel 'Bitch Of Pain'. In judging Kyle even before I had met him it felt, at least in conjunction with this 'brothel' law, like a similarly smug conceit – a vanity that I was, by definition, morally superior to him.

Naturally, this righteous advantage returned bang on cue when our evening meeting finally arrived. Kyle stepped over a couple of cats to shake me by the hand. Simone and I had spent the preceding few hours talking and we were enjoying that otherwise inconceivable intimacy which an interview can sometimes elicit. Kyle looked awkward and apologized for breaking up our tête-à-tête. 'Don't worry,' I said too cutely for my own comfort, 'we were just talking about you . . .'

'Good things I hope', he said with a lop-sided grin.

While I shook his hand silently, Simone crooned, 'What else, *cherie*, what else?'

Kyle, I think, could guess the contents of my 'what else' but he gave me a reassuring pat on the back and soon, like

long-lost chums, we were drinking Guinness and talking about being foreigners in London. Before long, Kyle was whipping out sharp jokes along 'Have you heard the one about the Swede, the Frenchwoman and the South African who were lost in London?' lines. Despite everything I found him laconically funny and after our third bottle of Guinness I started to agree with Simone that his paintings exuded a special spark – particularly when she tilted the living room spotlights so that they shone down on his colourful canvases. They then looked like the kind of paintings Jackson Pollock would surely have splashed down if he had been a Swede living with *La Chienne de Souffrance* in Clapham, *aprés* a spell in a deep-pan pizza restaurant.

Kyle concurred, graciously, and flipped off the top from another black bottle.

But our swinging mood hit a rut when the doorbell rang and, with a sad smile, Simone went to administer the whip to one of her masochistic clients.

Suddenly unshackled from cheeriness I turned the tape recorder on and asked Kyle if it bothered him to be just sitting here with me while Simone had to spend an hour in her 'Bitch Of Pain' guise.

'Well, I can see it bothers you,' he said with a tart smile. 'I can understand what it must look like on the outside. But if you weren't here, you know, I wouldn't be sitting around drinking. I would be upstairs working. I know my work is not difficult in the way that Simone's is, but look, it's not exactly what they call a fucking picnic either. I work hard. I'm desperate for my work to sell so we can start a different life – a life where Simone doesn't have to work at all if that's what she wants.'

But in the meantime, while he was painting their way towards this often elusive dream of fame, did he not agonize over the work she did as a prostitute?

'Simone is the most special person in the world to me – I only think of her in that way. She is never a prostitute to me – only the woman I love.'

Doubting the reliability of Kyle's slick answers, I pointed out that Simone called herself a prostitute.

'Ah, but Simone is a semanticist – she always looks for a different kind of word to me!'

'But the men who pay her also think of her as a prostitute,' I countered.

'I don't think so. Prostitution means selling sex. Simone is not selling sex. There is never any desire on their part for penetration. They're too fucked up – they need a different kind of therapy. It's quite interesting when you think about it. They must be so numbed in their ordinary lives that the only way they can feel is through extreme pain. They need that violence. These men do not even touch Simone – so she's more a therapist in a way than a prostitute.'

I expected to hear this 'therapy' pitch first from a prostitute with a more legitimate right to make such a claim than from someone like Kyle. While the men did not touch Simone she was certainly touching them, with pokers and chains and needles. Surely the inflictor of pain can become afflicted with hurt herself?

'Again it's an interesting point. But, my friend, you must understand that we have thought these things through together – as a couple. None of this is new to me – or to Simone. And it has always been Simone who has led us down this route. It was she who started with Mandy, it was she who asked me if she could work on her own, it was she who decided the type of work she would do in her cellar. And here she is - back so soon. You can ask her for yourself.'

Simone's session was over, far earlier than expected. She looked happy again and so I changed the subject; for whenever we spoke about her prostitution it seemed to open a window onto her distress. But she drew a curtain across this when she was with Kyle. Then, she was just simply delighted to offer me another Guinness and to look down at Kyle, lovingly, as the fattest cat of all stretched across her lap with a yawn.

Outside, I saw the shadowy figure of her client walking quickly away into the night where, Simone said, his own wife would be waiting for him to return home. She would be unaware of the fact that he had just paid £300 to be punished by a silent 'Bitch Of Pain', by *La Chienne de Souffrance*, by Simone Maillard who was then chattily elated that this forty-eight-year-old man, this woman's husband, had left *her* home; the home she sometimes called 'the place of words'.

Back in Mandy Kavanagh's more ironically named 'house of pain' a few days later she finally gave vent to her feelings about the effect of Simone's relationship with Kyle. 'It disturbs me,' she sighed, ''cos their relationship's built on a basic S&M premise. Simone may work as "The Bitch Of Pain" but outside her cellar she's dominated by Kyle. She's given up mastery over language to be mastered, instead, by him. And that's not just on any old superficial level – it goes far further than that, it goes into her submitting herself to the cause of his painting. I think he's a creepy, crappy piss-artist anyway! And here Simone is, she's the one suffering for *his* art! It's ludicrous. She's given up translation completely and yet she's a fucking brilliant linguist.'

People, I said to Mandy, would no doubt say similar things about her – that she had sacrificed some of her own talents for these five years of work as 'The Terminator Angel'.

'But at least the choice was made for me alone,' she retorted. 'I became a prostitute for *my* benefit. I think Simone has given up language, to become a Dominatrix, for Kyle's benefit. That seems wrong to me. And I suppose I feel a little guilty about this because if it hadn't been for me, Simone would probably never have started in prostitution. When I told her there was easy money to be made, that this top-range of prostitution often had nothing at all to do with penetration, I got her thinking.

She saw a way of "buying time", as she put it, for Kyle to paint.

'I don't think Simone would ever fuck a man other than Kyle, no matter how much money was involved. I admire that fidelity but then I also have to see the type of things she does instead. Her boundaries are very different from mine. I would never brand or pierce anyone – not just because of what it does to them but because of what it would do to me. It would fuck me up and I'm afraid it's beginning to fuck Simone up - but I tell her this and she just gets all hurt. She takes it too personally. She thinks I'm gunning for Kyle rather than thinking about her.'

I was curious about this idea of guilt, that Mandy should somehow feel responsible for leading Simone into prostitution, almost as if she had led her astray – away from her previous focused path of linguistics. While Simone might be under a spell of love for Kyle were we not doing her a gross injustice in thinking that she could not make a decision for her own benefit – especially when we were continually lauding her intelligence?

'I feel partly responsible because I encouraged Simone to do some work with me. Having worked for three years in domination, I should have pointed out some basic truths to her. I should have said, "Stick to fantasy – avoid the extremes of S&M, avoid the crazies." After all those years of Alistair I should have told her that. Instead I painted a softer picture where she'd do some work with me and make a quick £150 without a man even laying a hand on her.

'Simone and I have a very special relationship but it's complicated too. I think she always looked up to me in a way, or so she says, and this was mixed up with some small infatuation too. As for me, I learnt how extraordinary she was when I set out as a prostitute. She wasn't amongst my closest circle of friends then and she wasn't with the four women I first told about my prostitution. They were my best friends and after my first few times, when I was certain that I could cut it as a hooker, I invited them all round for dinner.

'We had a great evening for a while. I'd made this huge pot of pasta and we drank one bottle of wine after another. Finally, over coffee, I made this pathetic little speech. I told them that they were the people I was closest to in the whole world and so I wanted to tell them about this change in my life. They were giggling, "Go on, tell us, Mand, go on!" They thought I was going to tell them that I'd finally met the man of my dreams. When I told them, and they knew right off that I wasn't joking, there was dead silence. The evening disintegrated. Two of my friends left in tears, another wouldn't speak to me and the fourth kept saying, "But you've got everything, Mand, you could get *any* man you want." The one crying friend just kept saying, "I'm so disappointed – you, Mandy, of all people, a *prostitute*!" It was like I had just told them that I was a thief or a murderer.

'Well, now I can be blasé. I can think, "Shit, a lot of ordinary women have a hang-up about prostitution. That's their problem – that they see us as enemies, rather than as their wisest allies. Maybe that's because they fear or even envy the prostitute? Because which woman knows more about men, about their fears and weaknesses, than the prostitute?" But *then* they hurt me terribly. They literally abandoned me. Of course they're the type of girls who still send me Christmas cards every year but I only speak to the one now and she's full of "So what's it *really* like then?" gush.

'And that's where Simone came in – she became my best friend soon after that night. I was worried about telling her because I didn't want to lose her friendship as well. But she was lovely. She was just compassionate and interested. After all the hypocrisy of my other friends – who used to go on about finding men with lots of money before *they* turned round and called me mercenary – Simone was like a breath of fresh air. And with Simone I'm allowed to have another life. I'm her friend above everything else, her friend who also loves books and Paris and Prague and Rome, like her.'

As they grew closer over the years, Mandy began to talk more to Simone about her prostitution. Although naturally inquisitive to hear about the sexual services Mandy offered in her various hooker roles, Simone could not help but compare their very different lives. She felt that she could never live the isolated, if independent, life led by Mandy. Instead, she was thankful that she lived with Kyle. But when she saw how little money she and Kyle had in contrast to Mandy she began to wonder if she too should not go down this path of prostitution. Besides, Mandy always seemed to have whole mornings and afternoons free while she and Kyle were slaving over, respectively, academic translations and pepperoni pizzas.

I remembered recording Simone's own description of the day she decided to start work as a prostitute. 'We were sitting around drinking in Mandy's blue room one Sunday night – just the two of us. We were a little drunk and we were talking about sex when we were young. And I told her that when I was at university in Paris I had made love to two different women. With the second it had been a long-running affair. I said that I knew that I was attracted to women and that I'd always kind of fancied her. Then I said quickly that I knew she was straight. I must have gone bright red and said something about being drunk because she was very sweet to me. She said she was flattered but she knew how much I loved Kyle. But she also said that she still had a proposition to make to me.

'When she said she needed to open another bottle of wine first, I got very interested. So then it came out. She had this client, Christopher, a nice man, she said, who kept offering her a lot of money to put on a "show" with another girl. She told me she would never allow him to bring a stranger in off the street so the whole idea had faded. But then he started asking her again – so she was asking me now, would I work with her this one time. She said it would mean £150 each and that no "real" sex would be involved.

'I wanted to say "Yes!" at once but I thought I should

think it through. I talked it over with Kyle and, to tell you the truth, I think he wanted to come to the show too! I know he likes Mandy; but he always says, "No way, *non*, *niet*, *nein*, never!" He mocks me like that. He's mad sometimes. Anyway, Kyle said I should do it. I was very nervous beforehand. Not of the man – but of being with Mandy in this situation where we would be dancing and stripping together and fooling around. But she was wonderful.

'She showed me the way from the very start. We had to stay in control. She would say, "This is work – let's be professional about it, it's not us doing something intimate or private. We can't ever forget that a man will be paying to watch us all the time." But she also made it fun. She's really funny. I had to fight to stop laughing out loud because she acted out these crazy porn movies. "Ooooo, mademoiselle, my big melons are aching for your touch" and "Ze pussy – she is on fire, baby!" He really got turned on by that stuff. He thought we were being serious. Mandy says we're getting paid all this money just to be "girly". Sometimes, you know, it's fun to pretend you're a young girl again. But Christopher only has us do a few shows a year now – he says we're too expensive for him. And he likes Mandy more than me anyway. He loves her boots. They drive him wild.'

From that farcical pastiche of porno lesbian lust it was only a short step for Simone to branch out on her own. But without Mandy to parody male desire Simone found herself being drawn into the better paid but more sombre quarters of sado-masochism where, as she now knows, there are few words to be said, let alone 'ze pussy on fire' laughs to be had, amidst her cellar's bleak soundtrack to *The Scream*.

Everywhere I looked in this enclosed world of friends and prostitutes I seemed to see swirling contradictions. Mandy Kavanagh, so strong and controlled and yet, ironically, too vulnerable to think of succumbing: to even the idea of love; Simone Maillard, 'The Bitch Of Pain', being left wide open

to hurt by her love for a man she was supporting; that man, Kyle Johannsen, debating the semantic point of whether non-penetration meant non-prostitution while his linguistic lover mutely flogged another man for money; Mandy's ceaseless, apparently futile struggle with Alistair; all those wives wondering, or not, where their husbands might have been while they were actually paying for pain; Gregor Samsa in *Surf Butt Bandits*; Simone, again, suffering for *Kyle's* art; Kyle, again, musing over the 'agonies' of artistic creation; that, by living together, Simone and Kyle were criminal brothel-keepers; that Mandy had been abandoned by her women friends for the 'unforgivable' act of becoming a prostitute. On and on they rolled ambiguously, entangled together, these almost mythological reinventions and justifications of self.

But there was a singular problem for me then, after nearly two months, as late summer flattened out into sticky heat. The different truths I had discerned about 'high-class' prostitution had yet to be checked against the coherent words of any of Mandy's or Simone's clients. Without access to their consumers, Mandy's and Simone's prostitution would stay suspended in quotes and in my own imagination.

The extremity of masculine sexual and psychological desire with which they worked appeared as far away as ever – until the day Mandy Kavanagh phoned me to say that one of her clients had agreed to meet me. 'And he's not a uniform-wearer, either,' said Mandy helpfully, 'so you won't have the hood problem that Robert gave you . . .'

'So if he's not a uniform-wearer,' I asked, 'what exactly is he?'

'Well, it's Christopher, the lesbian-fantasist . . .'

'Oh *him*! Could be interesting . . .'

'It will be, I can promise you that,' Mandy breathed down the phone. 'Especially as he's basically a fetishist.'

'What's his fetish?'

'Feet.'

While I waited for Christopher to call me I wondered what

a foot-fetishist would look and sound like. I had not got very far when, about five minutes later, the phone rang again.

A deeply respectable, radio-announcer voice said my name. It was Christopher. After a few minutes of amiable, eloquent formalities on his part he confirmed that he would talk to me. 'How about early this evening?' he suggested.

They were obviously fast movers when they got going, these foot-fetishists. I asked him where we should meet. 'Why don't I drive over to you? It'll save you the walk in all this heat.'

He was already thinking about my feet, I thought wildly; in reality he was merely being considerate and, of course, careful that he should meet me where he could be sure that no-one he knew would see him.

At exactly seven o'clock that summery evening I heard his feet clipping down the stairs to my front door. I looked down at my own feet – they were unerotically covered in my one pair of sensible shoes.

Christopher, I noticed, was wearing expensive Italian shoes. They matched his elegant summer suit and fedora which shielded his face from both the sun and any prying newspaper photographers I might have hidden in the neighbouring bushes. We were both very nervous. I cracked open a few cans of beer while Christopher ran his hands anxiously through his full, ginger beard.

It was only after we had drunk down our beer, opened another and spoken blandly about these 'blistering' days that we both began to relax. We talked about writing and about architecture, Christopher's 'line', as he described it. Despite the recession, of which most architects were the first victims, his business was steady.

He hoped, he said suddenly, that he could trust me not to reveal his identity.

He must have been convinced, probably more by Mandy than me, for he allowed me to switch on the recorder and we began speaking about prostitution. He explained that he

had been visiting prostitutes for more than twenty years – he was about to turn fifty the following month. He also said that he had been married for five years longer than he had been seeing prostitutes.

'I love my wife,' he murmured with a slight quaver in his otherwise resonant voice, 'but ever since I can remember I've been drawn to prostitutes. I was always too frightened to visit them when I was younger. I think I expected to be beaten up by a pimp or to catch some disease. But the lure was very strong.'

'Why are prostitutes so alluring?' I asked.

He thought for a long time before answering. 'I find women very attractive. I think you could say I am a little in awe of women. I know it's ridiculous in a way but I have always put women on pedestals. My mother was a very strong and special woman. I was also taught by a beautiful and authoritative governess. There's no doubt that my first sexual feelings were towards her.

'And when I grew up I found that I was not so free and easy with girls my own age. I lusted after them but there always seemed to be obstacles in the way – my shyness or their haughtiness towards me. Of course it was just in my own mind, these problems. But even after I met my wife I was still fascinated by the idea of visiting a prostitute. And their allure, to go back to your question, is their availability. I was always turned on by the fact that they were there. Whenever I wanted they'd be willing to see me, even if I was shy and awkward – as long as I paid them. It seemed a fair enough exchange without any undue complications.'

It took him a long time, with many pauses, to fashion this answer. I liked the fact that he thought so carefully and spoke so directly. The honesty of his complex fear of 'real', and therefore not always 'available', women seemed to trouble him – even at the moment he said these very words. He was thinking so hard, as if it were the first time he had considered this question, that he had yet to give my feet a second glance.

'You're a man,' he continued, almost as a way of explaining this neglect of his fetish in my company, 'and so you know that it can be very difficult to have an ordinary relationship with a woman. Of course it can be very beautiful too but often the day-to-day problems seem uppermost. These problems, to me at least, have a lot to do with responsibility. It's my responsibility to keep my wife happy and secure. It's my responsibility to ensure our lives run smoothly.'

'Surely your wife feels a similar responsibility towards you?' I said.

'I think less so. Maybe it's because we're from a different, older generation to you and Mandy and Simone. With my marriage I feel the burden rests on me.'

'Do you think that's because you like to put a woman on a pedestal, as you said.'

'I'm sure that has something to do with it. But I've always felt with ordinary relationships that the onus is on the man to keep things together. Things are different with the prostitute. She is more in control – I can let go.'

I asked Christopher, who was speaking more quickly as he warmed to his theme, if this was why he liked Mandy – because she was so clearly in control.

'Absolutely. She takes care of everything from the moment I walk in. She can be very commanding.'

'Like your governess, perhaps?'

'In a way, yes, but with Mandy it's more *her* that turns me on. The other prostitutes I saw before her were fine on the whole. But I liked them to wear uniforms – with Mandy I like it most when she's just herself. Then I think this absolutely beautiful woman is a *prostitute* and that means I'm with her for this hour. I don't have to perform for her – I can just drink in her beauty.'

'It sounds quite poetic, if a little confused,' I said slowly.

'Of course, it's totally romantic! I know that – she knows that. Again that's the allure of prostitution. The honesty of the arrangement – plus the fact that I can worship at

her feet without having any real-life commitment to her.'

'So prostitution allows you to escape your everyday reality?'

'Yes – fantasy being brought into temporary reality. That's it, in a single phrase. For example, I always had a fantasy that two beautiful women would seduce me at the same time. It's a stock male fantasy. I know it's never going to happen in "real life" – but with prostitution it's possible. And so it's happened – with Mandy and Simone. I know they're only doing it for the money but it still turns me on just to look at them. They're both very attractive, as you know. And I find that as I get older I'm aroused by the prostitute who doesn't actually look like a prostitute.'

This enabled Christopher to muddy further the distinction between fantasy and reality. While they looked like 'good girls', Mandy and Simone were really 'bad girls'.

'But it's also the fact that I'm now less interested in straight sex with a prostitute - no matter how "good" or beautiful she might look.'

'What,' I enquired with a gulp, 'has taken the place of straight sex?'

After his now familiarly extended pause, Christopher said the word with an accompanying flush rising up his face. 'Feet.'

With shamefully mock surprise, I echoed his favourite word. 'Feet?'

'Yes, feet – and boots, too.'

'Why?'

'Women's feet are beautiful. It gives me such pleasure to kiss the feet of a lovely woman. I feel I'm worshipping her in the correct way.'

'This sounds like a religious experience, Chris.'

'It's an experience like no other – when I lick Mandy's boots it both soothes and arouses me.'

Baffled, but still interested in the strangeness of his reaction, I asked him when he'd first discovered this particular fetish.

'With my governess – she wore the sexiest boots imaginable.'

I was tempted to tell him a filthy joke Kyle had recited to Simone and me about a Swedish governess the week before. But that would have been a cruel toe-stepping jibe. Instead I offered this bearded, earnest fetishist another beer and opened up a new can for myself.

As we drank quietly for a short while, I looked across the room at him. To my as yet unfoot-fetished mind it sounded most like his declared 'awe' of women meant that he preferred to evade their most basic sexuality – defined by the vagina, the cunt, or 'that gaping hole' as he said anxiously. There was something safe about worshipping a foot; for that foot, certainly, was less 'demanding' than the feared wet, 'gaping hole'. There was obviously little real responsibility to womanly pleasure when kissing a prostitute's foot.

Yet I knew that he was growing weary of this intimate investigation of his most private fears. So, instead, I settled back for a little trivial boot-room talk to round off our evening. 'Tell me, Chris,' I said airily, 'what's so special about Mandy's feet then?'

'Ah, Mandy – she has such beautiful, such elegantly tapered feet. They look like intelligent feet and they look like feet that could dance wonderfully all night long.'

Before he went on to tell me that if they weren't such 'intelligent' feet they could probably have danced in *The Red Shoes*, I asked Chris about Simone. What sort of feet did she have?

He looked wistful for another long moment before he replied – 'To me, it looks like she has feet full of pain. I think she should dance more, for that's how feet talk . . .'

Chapter Four

Cool on the Cross

I thought again of those strange, feet-dancing words a few months later. In the middle of a small room in King's Cross, surrounded by black and white photographs hanging from every wall, I stared at the print of a young girl dancing. Barefoot and wearing a flower-patterned dress, she was caught in a ballerina pose. Her weight rested on the ball of one scrunched-up foot while the other leg piked up towards her head which was already encircled by her bangle-dangling arms. She had such long hair that a strand had twirled its way round the flexed toes of her free foot. Her face, turned towards the camera, glistened with sweat and laughter. She couldn't have been more than sixteen.

Although it lacked the painterly quality of some of the photographs around it, this frame stood out from the rest for a different reason. The others, without exception, were of prostitutes who walked the streets of King's Cross. Like the photograph of the dancing girl, who I soon learnt was Docherty's sister, the prostitution prints were shot with an almost unbearable intimacy. Even when they weren't horsing around together for the benefit of his camera at two in the morning, even when they were seen alone and in a mood as black as any January night, the prostitutes looked back at Docherty, and out of the frame, with a curious kind of interest that he should find them worth remembering. Depending on the time of day and the shade of light falling across them, these images of the Cross

looked either austere or luminous. But, always, the effect of walking into that room was like entering a shrine.

He liked me to call him 'Docherty', the name he had chosen on the day he changed his life. While he had always been attracted to ideas of transformation it had once been enough for him to merely listen to such talk at drunken late night parties. There, his friends had spoken often about avoiding the banality of ordinary life. It seemed as if each of them was going to be great at something, as someone different to the person they already were. They were going to be painters or politicians, millionaires or serial killers of the rich. But the more they talked the less likely it became that they would ever change. Docherty stood slightly apart from them. For one thing, he never voiced their exalted kind of ambition. Instead he would shrug a little and say that he had no specific thoughts on the future they already celebrated. Yet within this apparent emptiness he found the belief that he could invert the very essence of himself.

And one day he did become someone else, different from anything imagined by his friends during their precocious time together. On a Sunday morning in September, years ago, he sat down at the plastic-topped half-moon table in his King's Cross kitchenette. He positioned his chair so that he was warmed by a thin band of sunshine shining through the flat's only window. The sunlight reached the new yellow pad where he had written twenty potential pseudonyms for himself.

He thought then, drawing more pleasure than usual from his first coffee and cigarette of the day, that there could be no finer moment to reinvent himself. It was still early, before nine even, and he was conscious of the quietness both in and outside the concrete block of flats. He was aware of a similar stillness within himself. As much as he relaxed into the sensation he wondered if this was the serenity which comes only to the utterly bereft.

He had not slept much the previous night. It had been

typical of most nights he had endured through that terrible year, a year in which his life slipped away to the point where there were days when he no longer cared whether he lived or died. Earlier that fateful week he had visited his doctor. He was told that his sleeplessness was a symptom of acute depression. The doctor, an amiable but overworked man, did not press him on the source of his sadness. As he would not have known what to reply, Docherty was relieved by this absence of compassionate questioning.

So he sat silently in the doctor's green clinic, listening to the advice that a holiday might cure him of his insomnia. Having neither the money nor the inclination to leave his flat he requested a course of sleeping pills as an alternative arrangement. This was refused. He was, after all, 'fighting fit'.

Docherty sank even deeper into despair. Some of his friends suggested that he should 'lighten up'; that he should get drunk or drugged-up every once in a while so that he could 'forget' himself again. When he was younger he had tried this diligently. On ragged jags of Jack Daniels and acid he thought that it sometimes worked, this method of illumination, this fragile art of forgetting. But it was never himself that was truly forgotten; it was never a way of sustaining that initial feeling of lightness, the lasting release he imagined only his own death would bring.

He knew that retracing these steps would remind him of that other death which still pierced him: the death of a girl he had only realized how deeply he loved when she kicked a chair from beneath her feet and, in that fine floral printed dress, swung slowly out of his life. He had done enough drinking and drug-taking to see that, far from releasing him into oblivious refuge, they could unleash the most wretched visions he had buried deep within himself.

These thoughts had welled up inside him the night before. At the seemingly appointed darkest hour, around four in the morning, he finally had had enough. Sitting upright in bed and drinking from a plastic bottle which leaked tepid

water onto his old *Taxi Driver* T-shirt, he recognized the absurdity of his anguish. If it was to be suicide then he might as well get it over and done with at that supposedly dramatic moment of realization. And if he really did not yearn for death then he would go on, but in a different kind of way. He would change what he hated most about his life – he was sick of never having enough money and he was sick of dead-end work.

By the time the emptied bottle had soaked the bed he had decided to postpone further thoughts of death. A few hours later he had his list of names. He'd picked them out from the shelves of books and films lining the wall opposite his rickety table: 'Bickle, Carver, Caulfield, Dedalus, Docherty, Kane, Malloy, Malone, O'Neill, Travis . . .'

There were other names besides these but they have long since vanished from memory. Some belonged to writers but most were taken from within the books and films themselves, from characters he had seen and understood. But the significance of their source was neither particularly literate nor literary. It was more an intimate gesture to his previous self to set out a list of possible new names by looking at his own shelves than by flipping through the telephone directory.

'Docherty' was one of these characters, a big man from Scotland. This was the name he finally ticked. The way 'Docherty' resonated from his mouth, with a guttural first syllable softening into a sigh, was what he liked most about his new name. It had a sound all of its own, a boom and a breath, which could be used either to echo a portentous past or to whisper a mysterious future.

To front 'Docherty' he added the first name 'Lee', after his favourite Kung-Fu movie icon – Bruce Lee. He had the pseudonym he needed for his new start; and ever since he's been known as Lee Docherty or, most often, just Docherty.

By the time I met him I had interviewed twenty prostitutes and a quarter of that number of clients. Despite the

comparatively cheap and unspecialized services offered by prostitutes other than Mandy and Simone I was struck by the way extraordinary themes resounded from one life into another, the most telling of which was the need for shifting identities and exaggerated personae wherever sex was considered a business. I had begun to understand that prostitutes call upon hidden resources to withstand both the personal rigours of their work and the hypocrisy of public perception towards its existence. The latter is generally so scathing that the prostitute is virtually compelled to seek out a double identity.

This distinction between the private and the professional reminded me of the eulogistic way in which Norman Mailer claimed that some boxers 'begin to have inner lives like Hemingway or Dostoevsky, Tolstoy or Faulkner, Joyce or Melville or Conrad or Lawrence or Proust . . .' Instead of articulating the disciplines and dreams of boxers, Mailer ultimately only provided an admiring emphasis of their 'otherness', an 'apartness' which has as much to do with a fighter's past as his present.

Whatever their romantic limitations, I'd always been a sucker for such concepts of secret history, of fantastic 'interior landscapes'. It was this which drew me in irresistibly towards prostitution – for it was impossible to escape that similarly necessary 'otherness' most prostitutes reach for when they set themselves up for work. While the lives led by hookers besides Mandy and Simone were less cerebral, they were equally adept in calling up divisions of self to separate their 'real' from their 'whore' identities.

Docherty's photographs spoke most of this extravagant inner life – both his own and that of the women who looked back into his camera. Mapped coarsely on their faces, personal histories curved through them like dark rivers in unknown countries. These shadowy expressions depicted a furtive sex-world lending itself naturally to such mysteriously personal mythology.

Transmuting itself into this outlandish journey, my

exposure to the wide arena of prostitution became increasingly compelling. Yet as an outsider, my initial comprehension of the sex business was obscured by my own interest in the distinctiveness of its practitioners. Until I could penetrate their separation from other people it appeared futile to even attempt to give voice to the lives, whether lived internally or not, of the prostitutes I knew.

So I repeatedly found myself skirting around this subject whenever I was asked that 'What are you doing these days?' party-going question. Much of my earliest reticence to speak about prostitution had a lot to do with the arch 'Mmmmm . . . interesting' observations I had already encountered. I also preferred to imagine that I was living out my own secret identity – a polite bumbler in the real world, but a relentless traveller in prostitution's kinky life of the mind.

Yet I buckled in the face of one particularly assertive American girl, called Lesley, at a party so dull that it could not even boast any visible signs of outer life. With that open-faced curiosity even hardened New Yorkers can assume abroad, her questions persisted until I at last mumbled that I was 'sorta writing something about prostitution, maybe . . .'

'What do you mean – "sorta" and "maybe"?' she asked.

'Well, I guess I mean "probably" . . .'

'When you *finally* decide "definitely",' she said, 'give me a call.'

'Why?' I asked, wondering if this dead party had forced her to admit an enigmatic career as a prostitute.

One of my old lovers became a prostitute a few years ago,' Lesley said less forcibly.

'Oh . . . well, um, how's she finding it?'

'It's a "he" . . .'

'I see,' I must have said knowingly.

'No, you don't – he's not gay. He's what they call a "gigolo" – you met any of them yet?'

'No – but I'd like to meet your friend.'

'I thought you were only "maybe" writing about prostitution!'

'It's not really a "maybe". It's been definite for a while.'

'Good for you!' she laughed. This was a refreshingly different reaction. Up until then, apart from my closest friends, the few English women I had told about this book had tended to smile nervously and take a step back from me as if they might be similarly contaminated by perversion. Most people imagined that such sustained exposure to prostitution would be 'bad', rather than good, for me. Lesley, meanwhile, not only appeared interested in the subject but was also a veritable fountain of knowledge on the price a woman might pay to have sex with a man in New York, Amsterdam or London. She also said some incisive things about the way in which this kind of prostitution represented an unspoken taboo, only varying in depths of silence from city to city.

Yet her acumen carried an undercurrent of anguish. While her friend's immersion in prostitution a year or so after their break-up had opened up her previously closed interest in the idea of a man selling sex to a woman, she could not easily hide the pain she felt in having lost him, Lee Docherty, 'so completely'. Although he had left her for no apparently specific reason, she also knew that he had loved her while they were together. But he preferred it now, said Lesley, if they didn't even meet as friends. Everything he did after their split centred around his becoming a prostitute.

'It's not him being a "gigolo" which makes me sad. It's just that I'm not sure if he thinks of me as his friend anymore. He's cut me right out of his life now . . .'

'I'm sorry,' I murmured, not knowing what else to say.

'Me too – I really loved him. He's an interesting guy. But I'll call him for you. At least it'll give me an excuse to phone him. Maybe he'll meet you and, for me, you can find out how he really is . . .'

Having survived her early brashness, Lesley exuded a gentle kind of American charm. I can't say that I was

completely surprised that it worked once more on Lee Docherty – so much so that before the next week was through he met me for the first time because, as he said, 'Lesley asked me . . .'

Docherty lived in King's Cross, close to the station and the surrounding streets along which prostitutes have walked for more than a hundred years. He had lived there since 1987, long enough for him to think of the place as home. In King's Cross, where there were people and places which interested him, Docherty found a rhythm to life. He called it his 'routine'.

That was not the word which sprang to mind when I walked into his council flat early one November evening. There was something almost ghostly about the pattern of life Docherty focused on in King's Cross. Only the grace of the dancing girl spoke of another life beyond the Cross. Otherwise, the reason for my visit shone down from every framed prostitute.

Docherty's flat, on the fifth floor of a concrete high-rise, was small but functional. The kitchen had been turned into a darkroom and a ceaselessly sighing fridge doubled up as an alternative chair in the lounge. Despite its constricting size, the flat had been organized in such a way that there appeared to be plenty of space in which to walk. This lack of furnishing was made more noticeable by the many photographs hanging from every wall and by the absurdly large surrealist print covering the outside of Docherty's darkroom door. It was a copy of Salvador Dali's ghostly image of three clocks melting and folding over a bare branch, a table and a blurred face against a backdrop of fading sunlight. Its effect there was made all the more surreal by the surrounding photographs of night-time prostitution beneath the Cross. I later learned that Docherty intended no glib irony in choosing to hang *The Persistence Of Memory* in his flat, which was more a photographic museum than a conventional home for living in.

Although they could hardly have been more dissimilar in terms of layout and value, Docherty's flat made me think of Mandy Kavanagh's house across town. The contrasting homes were both dominated by dramatic photographs from their respective pasts. Just as Mandy's heroin Polaroid loomed over her tastefully colour-streaked 'House Of Pain' so Docherty's animated shot of his sister literally pirouetted over everything else in the room.

They were also linked by their reinventions of themselves along that secluded path of prostitution. Extending the comparison even further, Docherty not only lived alone but he was also, like Mandy, good-looking. Six-foot-two tall, lean and with short black hair, he appeared all the more striking to his female clients because he had that rare ability, at least for vagabonds like me, to make the most of whatever clothing he happened to be wearing. He looked cynically crisp whether dressed in his baggy 1950s-style cream suit or his faded 'Cool As Fuck' T-shirt and black 501s. Docherty said that he didn't care much about clothes, a claim borne out by his overt reliance on these two outfits as his personal response to 'smart' or 'casual' invitations from his clients; but he always wore them with a nonchalance which passed as his own definitive bash at style.

Apart from being fashionably dressed, a gigolo, at least according to cliché, is expected to be fawning and sycophantic. Whether from the shards of his own persona or out of instinctive professionalism, Docherty acted differently. He was almost curtly forthright, an enemy of small talk and banal compliments. This fascinated his women patrons because, beneath the surface good looks, it appeared to them that he was offering his real self. Docherty was reputed to be the best gigolo in London because women said he made them feel that, like him, they were 'serious' and 'contradictory'.

But I also thought of Mandy when I saw how nervous Docherty was during our introductory meetings. Whereas she was assured in both her home and in talking about her

work, he was much more apprehensive. Docherty was unconvinced about both the suitability of his flat for our interviews and his capacity to talk about himself. Moreover, when I tried to deflect attention away from him by describing the type of prostitution practised by Mandy and Simone, he became increasingly distraught. 'Man,' he groaned at one point, 'this S&M stuff is pretty distressing. These are the type of men some of my women are probably married to – it's little wonder they seem so unloved . . .'

A vulnerability seeped from Docherty – a feeling held in check by Mandy and even to an extent by Simone, despite the ferocity of their more difficult S&M sessions. Whereas Mandy had developed 'The Terminator Angel' with an icy clarity and Simone claimed to slip into her 'Bitch Of Pain' guise out of love for Kyle, he had become Lee Docherty on a dejected whim.

It was only during our fourth meeting that Docherty finally felt able to give some coherent reason for his becoming a prostitute. Until then we had only flitted across the subject, our conversation punctuated by his stilted silences and my wayward monologues. 'When I became ''Docherty'',' he finally said, 'when I became a ''gigolo'', I wanted to find some kind of freedom. At first I thought I just wanted the kind of freedom that a lot of money gives you. But then I saw that I needed something more than just being free from having to hassle about the gas bill. I've got enough money now to live well, if that's what I want. But I've had that before, I've had jobs where I earned a lot of money.

'I was looking more for the freedom that comes from starting a new life. I could have left everything behind and gone to live in Cuba or somewhere. But I wanted to change the inside of me much more. I wanted to tear out the past. New name, new identity, new job, new life, new person. ''Lee Docherty, prostitute'' – that was as fresh a start as I could dream for myself.

'I always knew I was different. We all have that feeling

when we're kids. It's just that that fades for most people as they get older. They feel pressure to be like their friends, their neighbours. They worry if they're not married by a certain age, if they don't have a steady job. I get depressed by the thought of living with one person my whole life, working in one job for hours on end every week, every year. Even the idea makes me a little crazy. I wanted freedom from all this so I became someone else – "Docherty".

'And in becoming a specialist type of prostitute I did find some freedom. I only have a few clients and I charge them a lot. Except for the short time I'm with them I do exactly what I want with the rest of my life. No one tells me what to do, when to get up, who to see. Everything's down to me. That's the way I like it.'

This speech surprised me, not only for the way Docherty echoed Mandy in selecting a strict rota of clients but also for its length and passion. Considering that he had previously said little more than two or three sentences at a time, this block of words virtually qualified as a confessional address. Just as he had opted for prostitution on impulse, so he decided to trust me on apparent chance. The reason for this conversion, he said, was that he had seen me the weekend before at a double-bill of *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* (parts I and III, subtitled *The Return Of Leatherface*) at The Scala, just down the road from his flat. Now my usual problem in being identified as a horror-splatter *aficionado* is that I invariably feel compelled to let it slip to the liberal accuser that I had sandwiched 'Leatherface' between, say, Renoir and Kurosawa triple-bills in the weeks before and after such a Texas excursion. Docherty, to his credit, was oblivious to such niceties. He was more interested in hearing that *Basket Case II* did not match the dark humour of its original and in telling me to seek out low-budget 'masterpieces like *Deranged, Motel Hell* and *Nekromantik II*'.

Although I couldn't help wondering what Docherty's refined women-friends made of his cinematic tastes, I was

relieved that he had at last begun to talk to me as if I was someone other than a fearsome interviewer. After hearing how I tried to discuss pornography with Robert, sporting South Kensington's sartorial answer to the *Texas Chainsaw* look, Docherty lightened up sufficiently not to worry about the impression he made as a shy interviewee. Over the next couple of months, in between the odd Scala sojourn to reaffirm our new-found splattering solidarity, I was told the full Lee Docherty story.

Even before he made his 'Docherty' choice he had thought often about prostitution. When he had been too young to know what the word really meant they had called his sister 'a whore'. His father, with a face like silent thunder, and his mother, hushing him anxiously, had refused to answer when he asked them why they were calling her by this word, a word whose gravity terrified him even though its exact intent eluded him.

He had even asked her, his sister, to her face, to explain the meaning of 'whore' and had felt himself reeling back when her hand struck him and when he saw that the tears splashed down not from his own eyes but from hers. He felt then that this one word must be the most terrible thing a person could say, worse even than saying that God spelt backwards was 'dog' or that the school head was an old fucker, a creaky wanker, or any of the other profanities they loved to whisper to each other at the back of his classroom. 'Whore' to him then, just twelve years old, and his own sister barely four years older, became an unspeakable word – especially when he learnt its precise meaning from a dictionary and knew that it could never be applied to her with any degree of accuracy.

But that time passed, even though he had sometimes wondered if he and his family would ever survive the trauma induced by that first whisper of 'whore'. He moved on, beyond that frozen frame in his memory of them falling apart together in Hitchen, in Hertfordshire. For

a while he forgot. Those were the five years when, after they had moved to Buckhurst Hill to make a fresh start, he came closest to skipping the past, when he lost himself in a ravishing world of speed, teenage girls and garage parties.

Even then he was separate from the others. As much as he tried he could never quite complete their circle of shared insecurities and preoccupations. Instead he was just there, ironically near the very centre of their group, almost as if he was the necessary hole in the middle of their otherwise minted milieu; minted, because they were stuck on sex and sweet on fame and felt like they could have much of both if they dreamed hard enough. Docherty already had something of each, although his fame was based on a boyish notoriety as a killer with the suburban girls. They seemed ready to do anything for him, these girls, if it meant that they might strip away his cool aura which was never quite understandable as either adolescent reserve or a stranger kind of adult resolve to be alone. But he liked kidding around with the girls and wondering what it would be like to score the winner at Wembley or to vomit before a sickened nation on *Top Of The Pops*. In those respects, at least, he was a lot like his sneeringly spotty friends.

'When I was a teenager it wasn't really a conscious thing that I kept a little apart from everyone else,' Docherty says. 'I was always there – at the games and at the parties – but I never felt like I could just lose myself with anyone. I always seemed to be watching others, never really letting go with them. I wouldn't say that I was unhappy – just a little detached. But I did like sex and I always liked being with girls. I never seemed able to fall for anyone though. And I also never "applied" myself to any single ambition. It wasn't like any big social statement but I just didn't believe much in anything.

'So when we left school I didn't see much point in doing anything else but following two of my friends who went to the LSE. Before I knew it I was doing this degree in

Economics and being bored to tears. Fuck it, it was terrible. That's when I was drinking and taking two caps of acid a week. I was wasted. Somehow I passed my first year and then, in the middle of the second, something weird happened. I was asked by this group of girls if I knew any male strippers. They were having this "post-feminist hen night". This friend of theirs was getting married to one of the Commercial Law lecturers. I was pretty cynical about that so I asked them why they were asking me. There were three of them and one said, "'Cos you look like you'd know a few dark characters." I said something like "I'm a dark kinda guy myself" and they all laughed and said, "We know, boy!" This went back and forth for a while and suddenly I found myself agreeing that I might as well do the strip. I liked them and I thought "why not?" But I wanted to be paid. They were a bit surprised when I said I wanted £100. There were going to be twenty of them there so it wasn't too much to ask. They tried to get me down to fifty but I stuck to my price. Without even knowing it I was setting down a ground-rule for myself in later years. But to get my hundred I had to agree that I'd throw in a kiss-a-gram and a full half-hour strip! They were pretty hard bargainers, those girls, but we had a deal.

'I was terrified on the night of the party – I'd never done anything like that before. But by the time I arrived they were all pretty drunk – just screaming and giggling and being outrageously "girly". I didn't have to do too much to make them laugh. They laughed at me and with me and I even laughed a little myself – 'cos I was surprised that I could pull off a stunt like that. I kissed the main girl a lot, I danced around to James Brown, I took off all my clothes to Barry White and the bride-to-be rubbed cream all over me during *Sexual Healing*. They went mad then and I had to duck away quickly. I was relieved to get out. I never did anything like that again but, I guess, it gave me the confidence to know that I could eventually turn to prostitution.

'I left university soon after 'cos I was sick of being a

student. I found this flat in King's Cross and I wangled this job as a runner at the Stock Exchange. It was in the peak yuppie-boom, big-bang time. I hustled, I made some money. I was there a year – hanging round guys who're like miniature versions of your pal Alistair. It was fucking gross. I was better at making money than most of them but I couldn't find the thrill in it. I wanted to buy my own chainsaw, I wanted to be "Leatherface" in the city, I wanted to carve up some of those smug fuckers. But I opted for a redundancy settlement instead. I could have saved my job. There were lots of other guys they wanted to get rid of. But I wanted out. I got six months' pay which was really lucky, a bit of a scam to tell the truth, and I just chilled out here, at the Cross.'

Docherty wallowed in his solitary space. He did little but spend time there, doing things which now he can hardly remember beyond the fact that they were dominated by sleeping and reading and video-watching. When he did go out it was invariably down the Pentonville Road, to triple-bills at the Scala Cinema. It was curious that the films which interested him most were of a certain kind. He loved and watched, again and again, *Taxi Driver, Hardcore, Ms 45 – Angel Of Vengeance, Driller Killer*, and the inevitable *Texas Chainsaw Massacre* trilogy. These were bleak, grainy films in which images of sex and violence and morality and death were pushed to the forefront of the screen. Yet he also found them, overflowing with images of retribution and redemption, to be moving rather than lurid. Even though he was from Hitchen and Buckhurst Hill, rather than Brooklyn or the backwoods of Texas, these movies said something intimate to his otherwise dispassionate heart.

Taxi Driver was his key picture in life. He had first seen it, in 1975, as a twelve-year-old boy. Fifteen years later it still carried a seemingly personal message for him. Docherty could even understand how John Hinkley had used the film, and his obsession with one of its central characters – the

twelve-year-old prostitute, Iris, played by Jodie Foster – as the justification behind his attempted assassination of the then President, Ronald Reagan. Robert de Niro acted out the part of Travis Bickle, the taxi-driving vigilante attempting to purge the streets of prostitution and pornography, with a measured balance of vulnerability and violence. Docherty felt that de Niro uncovered a stained truth about his own life in England, about the equation he had struck between fragility and fury to emerge as some kind of quintessential outsider. And Jodie Foster, hauntingly, reminded him of his sister, even though they looked and dressed completely differently.

But the film struck Docherty so forcibly because Travis Bickle, attempting to save Iris from prostitution, and Hinkley, trying to win the eternal remembrance of the real-life Jodie Foster, appeared to be defying the mediocrity of the everyday. Docherty himself did not dream of emulating their terminal violence; rather, he was fascinated by the attempted eclipse of their original selves. In this way he also imagined he could transform himself into something other than the mundane person he had seemingly become.

The renewed impact of *Taxi Driver* on him during the year that his redundancy pay lasted was such that he even took to imitating de Niro's austere Mohican and, most bizarre of all, eventually working as a mini-cab driver. For all its absurdities, Docherty's extreme immersion in *Taxi Driver* struck a chord with me. I remembered being similarly affected, if not quite to this degree, when I saw the film as a mid-1970s' South African schoolboy. My friend and I were so impressed by de Niro that we decided that at least one of us should take it on himself to arrive at school the following week with a mean Bickle-like Mohican. We spun a coin to decide who would be honoured with the shears. Although I would not have described myself then by this word, I was lucky. I called, naturally enough, 'heads' and the five cent piece turned up 'tails'. The outraged reaction

my friend's Mohican caused staggered both of us and it was only the thrashing he received from our uncinematic headmaster which deterred me from letting my head follow my heart into the *Taxi Driving* wastelands. I was, after all, riding a yellow bicycle in a town called Germiston rather than a yellow cab round Times Square; I was fourteen years old then. It was mildly disturbing that Docherty should identify so passionately with Travis Bickle's psychotic rage when he was in his late-twenties.

'It wasn't *that* bad!' Docherty grinned.

'Becoming an actual taxi driver is sort of extreme!' I said.

'Well my Mohican had grown out by then and I was looking ordinary again. I packed it up after a couple of weeks anyway.'

'Too much scum on the streets?'

'No!' laughed Docherty. 'It was just that I could hardly find the fucking streets. I thought I knew London but I got lost hopelessly night after night. I'd have these passengers screaming at me while I tried to read the A-Z in the dark. It was a total disaster and when this second-hand car I'd bought a few weeks before started to cut out at every corner I gave up being Robert de Niro . . .'

A few weeks after this that he went to see his wearily cheery doctor. How could he even begin then to talk simply of his life without spilling everything that he had held in for so long? He felt that once he started to talk he would never be able to stop. Unwilling to allow that to happen he decided on his radical gigolo change.

'But don't you find it disturbing,' I asked Docherty, 'that you became a prostitute not long after all this *Taxi Driver* stuff?'

'Why?'

'Because Travis Bickle's mission is to wipe away the "scum" of prostitution, to save Jodie Foster from being sold on the streets.'

'Well . . .' Docherty paused for a moment's thought. 'Don't you find it strange that after also loving the film

you're now hanging out with prostitutes, that you're writing about them? Where's your Mohican now?' As I tried to think of a snappy reply, Docherty ploughed on. 'Come on, we didn't identify with Travis Bickle's morality. Christ, the guy's insane. But, shining through the madness was the way he tried to transform himself, the way he sought salvation through change. That's what got to me. That's what the film's about – madness, violence, revenge, redemption. It's not about prostitution or pornography.'

'But you do still walk around King's Cross at night,' I said. 'You *have* become friends with some of the younger prostitutes on these streets outside. I know you're not going to blow their pimps away but isn't this also spookily like *Taxi Driver* – being repelled and drawn to the street at the same time?'

'Christ, I really do think you've got me down as a psycho! But the main thing to remember is that *I'm* a prostitute just like they are prostitutes. We're very different kinds of prostitute but that's what we all are – hookers! You shouldn't lose perspective on this whole *Taxi Driver* thing. If anything it was a romantic identification with the film. When it comes to prostitution there's no place for romance; only professionalism.'

Knowing that Paul Schrader had written *Taxi Driver* and directed *Hardcore* before making *American Gigolo*, I asked Docherty if that film had had any effect on his sexual decision.

'Uh uh. Schrader's great but I don't like *American Gigolo* much. Richard Gere's not my boy. Anyway, it was more business sense than the movies which got me working. Sure, I'm a prostitute, a gigolo, a stud, a hired gun, a toy boy, whatever the fuck anyone wants to call me. But more than anything else I'm a professional. To succeed in this business you've got to be professional in who you see and what you do with them. I'm not doing this for fun. This is not just my job, it's the way I live and so I make sure it retains a sense of order. I follow a routine.

I have the mornings to myself and the women know that if they want to date me they must do so between noon and midnight. Sometimes I'll stay the night if they pay the £250 rate – but I prefer just to spend two or three hours a time with them.'

£250 sounded an impressive fee to me until Docherty pointed out the discrepancy between his nightly charge and that of a female equivalent.

'This is *not* an equal opportunities business,' he said ruefully. 'I know that if I was a woman I could add another thousand on to my all-night fee. I bet Mandy Kavanagh would add on even more than that . . .'

'Is that because women paying for sex, or companionship, is still such an oddity?'

'Yeah, of course. But the real reason is that women have little economic clout. My clients are at the top end of the scale but where their husbands might be able to spend £1,500 without anyone noticing, it's much harder for the wife to even get away with £250. It's not their money. They have to depend on their husbands for income. They might pretend that it doesn't matter but it gets to them. The woman who's most at ease with me is "Molly" and that's because she's single and a company director. The money she spends in seeing me is her own. She has more sense of worth than the others. But even "Molly" earns nothing like she should. She's on about £40,000 when, if she was a man, she'd probably have been earning that ten years ago. So in this business I get a close-up look at the economics of the system. My problem is that I don't earn the same as my female contemporaries . . .'

'But then you don't have to deal with the type of male clients they do,' I pointed out.

'That's true! Thank fuck!'

'It also seems that where most women are driven into prostitution with the specific purpose of making money your choice to become a gigolo was more random . . .'

'Yeah, in the sense that I know I could find a job where

I would make more money than I do as a gigolo. I like the freedom and the time this job gives me. But when I do work I'm very professional. I know I can't do this indefinitely. It's like being an athlete. I've only got so many years in this business. I'm turning thirty soon – OK, so I'm in shape and I look all right and I've got a roving tongue and a vivid imagination – but there's gonna come a time when someone younger takes my place. I'm under no illusions about my life-span as a prostitute.'

One of the mysteries surrounding the gigolo's clandestine world concerns the physical demands of the job. While a woman prostitute can feign arousal, the gigolo's job inevitably requires a certain amount of genuine involvement. 'How do you keep it up – all this sex work?' I asked Docherty unambiguously. 'You don't have to take any strange pills called "Stallion" or "Stud Man" do you?'

' "Stud Man"?' laughed Docherty. 'No way! I pace myself. I've done this for three years. I stay cool as fuck. Otherwise I'd just burn out. If I can get away without fucking a client on a date I'm happy. It's like if you're a real hired gun you don't waste a bullet if you can help it. You don't just shoot for the sake of it – and I'm speaking metaphorically here, as in semen-shooting . . .

'Sometimes a woman just wants to be held and told that she's special. I push sex to the side then. Man, I can do that understanding trip in my sleep but, and this is when it gets tough, there're those days when you don't feel like telling someone that she's got unexplored potential, that she deserves someone more sensitive than the husband she's already got. I get paid £100 for two hours and if there's sex involved it's another £50. I never see more than one client a day because it saps me – mentally as much as physically. So it's a myth to think there's anything glamorous about being a gigolo. There's not. I dropped a couple of clients recently. They were paying me well, driving me around in open-backed sports cars. But they were the women I had

to lie most to. I just got sick of slipping my hand into theirs, giving a squeeze and saying "You're a really special person, Lucinda" or "I understand your pain, Belinda". Their fragility wore me down. They began to cling to me, they wanted something intimate from me. They were getting too personal you know, they were stepping over the limits of our professional arrangement.'

'What are the other women like?' I asked.

'Well I have eight regulars now which is about right. I like something about each of them. They're all different. I have one woman who mostly wants what she calls "great cunt-stretching sex" while the others want their pussy-demands balanced with other kinds of attention. We'll go to a French movie or to an exhibition at the National Gallery or to the theatre. The women who like me are into being "arty". They like to do these kinds of things and they like to make intelligent conversation about what they've seen over coffee afterwards. I listen to them and I tell them what I think and they like that. If they're in the mood, which they usually are, we then go off and have sex. But things are different every week. Maybe one week they want to be tied down and fucked from behind and then the next week they'll want to see some painting by Turner.'

From Docherty's description it appeared as if female consumers of prostitution were more eclectic than their male counterparts. Yet if the services he offered to them were often more social than sexual what did that say about their 'real lives'?

'They might be comforted by their husbands' wealth but some of them seem devastated by loneliness – by the fact that they have nothing in common with their husbands apart from the kids and the house and the habit of being together. They also all seem unfulfilled and unappreciated. So they want some stimulation, something a little dangerous. And what could be more different and slightly *risqué* – but still safe and discreet than a gigolo?'

Docherty's professionalism paid off. He worked amongst

the liberal rich in palatial homes in Knightsbridge, Chelsea, St John's Wood, Hampstead and further afield in Surrey, in Ascot and Virginia Water. Six of his clients were married women with ostentatiously wealthy husbands, privately educated children, barking dogs, housefuls of servants and their own separate bank accounts. Their public lives exuded a veneer of domestic bliss. Meeting them for the first time, Docherty implied, was like stepping into a pastel-shaded *Garden And Home* world brought to mellifluously vowelled life.

But that dream life was set strictly apart from their private liaisons with Docherty. Their covert gigolo-game was kept secret from all but a tight-knit circle of best friends. There were two exceptions to this set of married women: Molly, the thirty-six-year-old company director, who preferred to retain her anonymity for professional reasons; and Kitty, a fifty-three-year-old widow, who lived alone in a plush Knightsbridge flat and claimed pleasantly to have driven her husband to a premature death ten years ago when he left her with an estate, she said, as massive as the coronary which killed him. Whenever Docherty and Kitty were out on the town, whether at the opera or a restaurant, she delighted in introducing him as her '*gigolo par excellence*'. That gushing description, delivered in a fake French accent, inevitably induced uncomfortably forced laughter from those who then had to shake Docherty's hand, unsure whether the joke was on them or on him.

Still being held back from my potentially problematic interview with Alistair, I was especially interested in meeting some of these well-heeled women clients. However, I didn't hold out much hope that this would happen. Docherty's women risked public disdain for even seeing him – let alone talking to me about their sexual consumption. Docherty, as surprising as ever, was more optimistic that he could 'arrange something' for me. There was one pre-condition.

Assuming I already knew what he meant I assured Docherty of my discretion.

'You know that I'll turn a chainsaw on you if you're not discreet,' Docherty stressed. 'But that's not the condition I'm talking about. If you set up a meeting between me and Mandy Kavanagh then we've got a deal. I'll arrange something for you in return then . . .' Docherty had been yearning to meet Mandy ever since I told him that her favourite book was Dostoevsky's *Notes From The Underground*; for Pauline Kael had once written that '*Taxi Driver* is a movie on heat, a raw tabloid version of *Notes From The Underground*'. As far as Docherty was concerned, that sealed his spiritual link with Mandy.

The interest Mandy evoked wherever I spoke about her was such that I had to constantly field requests from people wanting to meet her. Inevitably, she turned down more invitations than she accepted. But Docherty was different and, following some unscrupulous sales talk from me, she at last agreed to a meeting. Apart from keeping my end of the bargain with Docherty I was keen to see how the two of them got along, particularly as their 'self-invention' and the 'professionalism' of their respective kinds of prostitution were not that dissimilar.

Having grown unused to such uncommercial 'blind dates' they both, I thought poignantly, insisted that I accompany them to the tasteful restaurant Mandy had chosen for their rendezvous. Similarly unsuited to the role of chaperon I suggested to Docherty that we also invite Lesley, who had introduced us after all. He must have been more nervous than I thought because he readily agreed.

When Mandy and I walked into the restaurant a minute past the scheduled time of meeting we found a scrubbed and newly-shorn Docherty having his just-pressed suit smoothed once more for luck by Lesley. She revelled in her role as the trusted ex-girlfriend. I was thankful that Lesley was there for without her the first half of the evening would have been disastrous. Mandy was strangely cool, if always polite, to

the increasingly sheepish Docherty. It was as if his charm had been worn down by excessive use and, faced with a woman who was never going to be a client of his, he appeared uncertain what to say or how to act. He sat there glumly while Lesley entertained Mandy and me with stories of her and Docherty's drug-taking escapades and, also, what it was like to be an American living in England.

As Lesley and Mandy swapped further witty stories about life in New York, Docherty suddenly switched from polite glasses of Perrier to double-Scotch tumblers. The change did him good because with each drink he looked a little lighter and by the time he was on to his third he was more like his old self. After he had whipped out a few of his Texas back-wood anecdotes he even had the courage to admit that he had been more frightened at the prospect of this evening than when sitting through any number of 'Leatherface' triple-bills.

'Well thanks a lot! Am I really *that* bad?' laughed Mandy.

'Oh no!' enthused Docherty. 'It's just that I'd heard a bit about you and you're even more beautiful than I imagined.' Lesley raised a tipsy brow in my direction as if to say 'Uh-oh!' 'Well, I mean more intimidating in a way, if you know what I mean.'

'I think I know what you mean, Lee,' said Mandy sweetly, 'but I'm not sure if I like it!'

'What I really mean is that you're even more impressive than I thought you would be!'

Trying to bale Lee out of his verbal quagmire, Lesley helpfully shifted the conversation on to a less personal setting by asking Mandy if she thought there were any similarities between her and Lee's prostitution.

'Well, I'm not really sure what Lee does with his clients!'

'Oh I'm very kind to them!' Docherty said bashfully.

'But what we all want to know,' Lesley responded with drunken fervour, 'is how you manage to keep it up day after day?'

At this point Docherty asked, with as much dignity as he

could muster, if Lesley would mind getting another couple of drinks from the bar as service appeared to have ground to a halt. Dragging me along behind her so that, in her words, Docherty could 'make his big play', Lesley said that she had never seen him acting so unconfidently. Although she claimed to be fully supportive of Docherty's work as a gigolo – seeing it as only right that women should also have the choice of turning to a male prostitute if that's what they wanted – Lesley was troubled by his awkwardness. 'I guess it must be difficult for him just to relax now. He must be so used to performing that when it's an evening off from work he gets all wound up. He should've stuck with me as his girlfriend, hey?'

When we returned to the table, Docherty and Mandy were more amiably comparing sexual services and prices. Back on professional ground his confidence returned and there followed an intriguing exchange between London's hippest male and female prostitutes.

But when the evening ended and they swapped telephone numbers it was clear that he did so with more serious intent. In the weeks that followed, Docherty increasingly cancelled appointments with his clients. He said to me that he was so smitten with Mandy that he couldn't possibly think about working as a gigolo. As Mandy only wanted to see him as a very casual, and definitely platonic, acquaintance, I felt unhappily responsible for the drastic decline of Docherty's once steadily lucrative business. Even a rare screening of *Basket Case* at The Scala only deepened his unrequited gloom by convincing him that his own life was heading the way of the film's repulsive and perpetually basketed hero. For a few maudlin moments it looked as if he was close to dropping his 'Docherty' pseudonym for what he considered to be a more fitting '*Basket Case*' alias.

Despite his depression Docherty insisted on fulfilling his promise to help me meet some of his clients. 'It'll take my mind off Mandy,' he mumbled bleakly. His sudden

cancellation of appointments had also startled Arlene and Rachel, his two most regular clients. Sensing his sadness, they were perhaps in an even more agreeable mood than usual to hear Docherty's request that they meet me. Nevertheless, he must have momentarily escaped from his *Basket Case* mood for he set up an interview and morning tea for me at Arlene's house in Ascot one cold Friday in January.

Realizing the enormity of the gesture they were making on his behalf, Docherty provided me with a few lessons in gigolo etiquette. I was to act with scrupulous discretion at all times. I was expected to be punctual and polite and sensitive to the significance of any stray visitors. If needed, I should even be prepared to impersonate a washing machine mechanic. The latter tip, especially, worried me as spin-dryer repairs were not my forte.

However, I needn't have worried. Arlene and Rachel had worked out an alternative back-up plan. In the unlikely event that Arlene's husband arrived home a day early from his business trip to Chicago, I was to act as a freelance journalist writing an article about 'life in Ascot' for one of the quality papers. I had my tape-recorder ready, after all, as ample proof. On the subject of this recorder, Arlene and Rachel had also given the matter some considered thought. While they would be willing for our interview to be taped I would have to transcribe the cassette before I left Ascot. This meant that they could dispose of the recorded 'evidence'.

'I hope you don't mind all this cloak-and-dagger stuff,' Arlene said, 'but you can appreciate our positions. It's not that we don't trust you but we just can't afford to take any chances.' Arlene was an elegant woman in her early forties who obviously knew how to play the part of the 'executive wife'. Rachel, her best friend and in her late thirties, was no less stylishly dressed in a 'little jazzy number I picked up from Nicole Farhi'. I said, rather crassly, that that was where Mandy and Simone also shopped. Rachel let this slip

by with a demure 'I expect all sorts of women shop there' remark.

Not wanting to take up too much of their time and feeling conscious of the strangeness of our purpose in meeting, I soon had the tape-recorder rolling. It took a while to get into the swing of the conversation. Arlene finally decided to confront the crux of the problem head-on. 'It's very difficult to talk about this at first. I've known Docherty for more than three years now but I wouldn't dream of telling anyone else but this one mutual friend Rachel and I have. What do I call him even?'

' "Gigolo" is such a horrible word,' Rachel interrupted.

'Well, women are meant to recoil from the idea of prostitution. Most people we know would be shocked that Rachel and I both pay Docherty for sex. And I'd be lying if I said it didn't sometimes bother me.'

'We're lucky we've got each other to talk to,' Rachel continued. 'Although I know that there are many more women than you'd ever imagine doing the same thing as us, it's a relief not to have to hide it from your best friend. There's such a stigma attached to the whole subject that I don't think I would ever have dared meet Docherty if it hadn't been for Arlene.'

I knew that Arlene had been Docherty's first client – a fact which she not only confirmed but then emphasized. 'I gave him the idea my sweet! He used to work for my husband and I met him at a barbecue we had here. I thought he was irresistible. He was very different to all the other young bucks. I never gave any of them a second glance. He was just glowering in a corner all evening, literally burning with intensity!'

'That's our Docherty all right!' chuckled Rachel.

'He was very interesting. Instead of wanting to talk about how well he was doing at work or what kind of fancy car he was buying, he just started talking to me about movies and photography. I asked him what he photographed and he said he'd just started taking photos of the prostitutes who

worked in King's Cross, near where he lived. I was intrigued and I made some off-the-cuff remark that that was a line of business he could do quite well in himself. He asked me what I meant and I said that some women would be willing to pay for a night of fun with such a hunky guy like him. I was a little loaded and I guess I was just coming on to him.

'Anyway nothing happened until about nine months later when he phoned me right out of the blue. He said he had been out of work for a year and he needed to earn some money. Did I have any suggestions? He was very forthright. I'd just started this little pottery business and I said I could do with some help getting the books in order. So he came over – to be truthful I was angling for an affair with him but he just came out with it. He said that affairs were messy and instead of going through the charade of him being paid on the pretext of doing my accounting we should do a more straightforward sexual deal. I was shocked. I asked him who he thought he was, speaking to me like that? He just stayed very cool. As he started to leave, for some reason, I called him back. I must have wanted him very badly. And I knew he was right. Affairs turn sour – there's jealousy and heartache. I didn't want to fall in love with him. I had a husband and two children and I wasn't going to give them up. So I said, "OK – we'll do it your way once and see how it goes." I gave him £100 and I didn't feel cheap or anything. I felt incredibly turned on. It was a wild thing to do. And he was very, very good in bed – as I knew he would be – and I've seen him a couple of times a month ever since without any problems. No confusion, no pain – just great sex and rock-solid discretion.'

'Well, no problems until recently!' said Rachel. 'He's gone a bit weird this last week or two. Blew both of us out. Do you know what's the matter with him?'

With both women looking searchingly at me I felt that this was not an opportune moment to tell them about their

gigolo falling for another Nicole Farhi dresser. 'Oh you know Docherty,' I answered shiftily, 'he gets a bit moody sometimes . . .'

'Never before with us!' said Rachel sadly.

'He's not paid to be moody anyway!' Arlene moaned indignantly. 'I think I'd better have a word with our temperamental stallion!'

'So how did you meet the "stallion", Rachel?' I asked curiously.

'Don't you two call him that – he's a very sensitive guy!'

'I'll give him something to be "sensitive" about if he doesn't watch out,' Arlene muttered darkly.

Ignoring her friend, Rachel explained, 'Arlene told me about him. I had guessed something was in the air but it still came as a surprise. Anyway I was curious to meet him. And boy, am I glad I did! Docherty is the sexiest guy I've ever met. He's a real hunk but there's something else about him that arouses me. It's his sense of mystery. As much as I've talked to him over the last two-and-a-half years I feel I've never quite got to the bottom of him. That's curiously liberating because he's like no-one else I've met. I find it erotic that he's so different.'

'Do you think it's difficult to get to know him precisely because he's a prostitute?' I asked.

'Well, you'd be better qualified to answer that question,' said Arlene, turning towards me. 'You're not one of his clients – have you got to know him?'

'I think we understand each other. But there's a line that always separates us – I'm writing about him so there are obviously some things that he prefers me not to know. And at the same time I tend to talk more to him about the things I want to write. So I'd say that what I do know about him I know well – but that doesn't mean I really know the "Docherty" you see . . .'

'Yeah,' sighed Rachel, 'he's very good at keeping up his professional persona. There's this wall around him which gives him real strength but, at the same time, you sense that

deep inside he's carrying some terrible pain. Perhaps it's just me imagining this vulnerability but he fascinates me because of it; and interesting people are always the sexiest.'

'So he's not just an archetypal "gigolo" – someone merely to have sex with?'

'I often think he is – for me at least,' Arlene answered.

'No, he's more than that to me,' Rachel said. 'But I also have to say that he does some amazing things to me in bed. He sets me on fire sometimes. He does things to me I can hardly believe. When I'm with him I feel so uninhibited which is strange for me because normally I'm very shy, I'm almost awkward about my sexuality with other men, even with my own husband. That's sad but true. Lee unleashes something in me, something that is almost overwhelming at times. I don't know whether I should really tell you this . . .'

'But you will anyway, Rach . . .' Arlene chuckled.

'Oh all right! Lee's fucked me in almost every imaginable position, in every possible way, and I still want more. I also want other things from him – but I don't push him because I know you can't get too intimate with him, you have to keep the most deeply personal facets of your personality to yourself. That's the way he works and I accept it. This is not a normal relationship, after all, is it?'

'But how does it affect the relationship with your husband?' I asked tentatively.

After a long pause as they exchanged one of those best friends' looks which are inscrutable to the outsider, Rachel spoke again: 'I love my husband but this marriage hasn't turned out the way I'd hoped. The same thing goes for Arlene. I suppose that's why we both see Docherty – because we feel something is missing from our respective marriages. But then we also get on with our husbands and we both have children and homes . . .'

'So we keep on as if everything's hunky-dory,' continued Arlene. 'And, you know, with Docherty around to fill in the gaps, it just about always is . . .'

'It's not a case that we want to leave our husbands, which must sound weird to you,' said Rachel.

'Well, married men who visit prostitutes tend to say exactly the same thing about their wives,' I replied.

'It's a frightening thought that,' said Rachel after a long silence. 'I sometimes wonder if my husband visits prostitutes . . .'

'Never!' scoffed Arlene. 'Money and power matters most to them . . .'

I decided not to mention Alistair at that explicit moment. Rachel continued dreamily, 'Not to Docherty though. That's odd, considering that he does this for money. But it's why we both feel completely safe with him. He has a real core of integrity. He would never put either of us in a compromising position with our husbands. And that's the advantage of seeing him instead of opting for the traditional route of an affair. Maybe the emotion's kept at bay but that can be a good thing. Affairs always end with hurt. That's why I'm sticking with our guy. I dunno, if things were different and I was ten years younger maybe I could have fallen headlong in love with him.'

'You already are, Rachel – at least a little,' said Arlene lightly.

'No I'm not! Too much has happened to him. I don't know if you can live with a man like Docherty, I don't know if you can love a man who is a prostitute. It's a very strange thing to do – as it is to be one of his clients, I guess. We live such different lives and maybe that's part of the excitement – that sense of doing something dark, something forbidden and forever secret with someone from another world . . .'

The more time Docherty spent in his clients' places of plenty the less comfortable he felt whenever he left King's Cross. Yet he had always known that the Cross was an area of dark tumult. When he walked down those streets late at night he sometimes felt engulfed by the promise of violence. There

were times when he heard it in a rancorous pimp's threat to one of his prostitutes and there were times when he saw its embodiment in a slap or a punch on a street corner. And Docherty could always imagine violence in the blurred faces of the men slowly circling the Cross in search of a girl.

Some of the sunken-faced and tight-skirted women who worked this beat recognized him whenever he passed. They'd sing out words like 'Hiya love!' and 'How're things, darlin'?'. Docherty, in his singularly private way, usually did little more than answer them with a polite nod. But particular women stood out for him and, to them, he was more forthcoming. He'd stop for a while and share some words with them.

Docherty never asked them questions like 'How's business?' When he spoke he was strangely direct. He'd ask a prostitute if he could photograph the shoes she was wearing because he liked the way they shone in the rain or else he kept the camera in his bag and told her to leave her pimp because he was pumping her full of junk.

As for the women, they were never quite sure how to take Docherty. When he first derided their pimps they wondered if he saw himself as some kind of replacement. But Docherty's scorn for pimping never translated itself into any form of alternative. He never made any promises; he never offered to take anyone away from the Cross. The pared-down language he used was not that of a pimp.

Neither did he come across as a potential client, no matter how often they tried to test him. He was not like any of their other voyeurs who trawled the streets, watching all the while but never quite managing to summon the courage to actually see through a proposition. Almost every prostitute knew a man who'd go far enough to pick her up on a street corner and drive her to a deserted warehouse site where, in the silvery dark, they'd talk about sex until it got to the point where he had to slide back the car seat and hand over his £20. Then, the sweat began to glisten and he'd back out of the deal on the slimmest of excuses;

only to reappear a few nights later in the hope of repeating the charade.

Docherty was different. He always refused their proposals at the very outset, but he did so in a way where his cordiality matched his conviction. His resolute refusal to enter any form of sexual banter also convinced them that he was not a policeman or any kind of Vice Squad undercover man.

If it hadn't been for his camera bag they would have quickly accepted him as merely being an affable neighbour. It took them a long while to grow used to his wanting to photograph them. But it was the very fact that he always asked for their permission before he aimed the camera their way that slowly convinced his favourite prostitutes that he meant them no harm.

When the mood took them – and Docherty somehow always seemed able to pick the right night and mood to come out on to the streets – they even liked being photographed. He was at his quietest then for he could never ask any of the women to assume an expression for his camera's benefit. Instead he just moved a little, shifting his position slightly so that a close-up, square-on shot of a face might follow one taken in angled profile.

It was after such a late night of intense photography that I visited Docherty again in his King's Cross room. He was still hurting with a love for Mandy Kavanagh which I thought, as he had only met her once, was more mythological than real. But he was also preparing to return to work again – his photography that night was a sign to himself, he said, that he'd answer Arlene's and Rachel's increasingly frantic calls the next morning. And, whatever the reason, he spoke to me that night like he had never done before.

'When I look round this room,' he said, 'at all these photographs I see my sister too. Look how alive she is in that photo. Sometimes I think it's my best – even though I took it when I was so young. But the prostitute prints

matter a lot to me too. They come from me and, being a prostitute, they say something about me too. They belong in this room. I'd hate to see them hanging in a gallery because I don't know how much they could mean to anyone else.

'The Cross is a hard place to be a prostitute. I could smell the desperation tonight. I could see it in the hatchet-faces and stained skirts. I could see it in the yellow bruises running down their bare legs. It was cold out there too. I felt something special for them tonight. They made me realize how lucky I am as a prostitute. I make a lot of money and I work in elegant places with some intelligent women. It's different out in the street.

'But they're alive, you know, these King's Cross prostitutes. They're women. That's why I photograph them – because they look incredibly beautiful together on the wall. Look . . . with my sister. I haven't told you this before but when I was twelve years old, not more than a few months after I took that photograph of her dancing on our front lawn, she started crying softly one night. We were at the dining-room table, with our parents, eating my mother's fish-pie. I got sent to my room when she began to sob. But even up there I could hear my father's voice, shouting "Whore, whore, you bloody whore!" She was sixteen years old and about to do her A-levels. She was also three months pregnant. She hardly knew what hit her. My parents were devastated. They felt swallowed up by shame.

'By the time they had pulled themselves together it was too late. She hanged herself on a Monday afternoon. She was wearing her favourite dress, the one in that photograph. I came home and found her, hanging in her room. This blue chair was lying upside down on the floor. I can never forget that. It was a week after my father called her a whore. I hardly knew her, being so young, but she was just a girl. She was my sister.

'It's strange, I know. I'm working as a prostitute and

I know as well as anyone what "whore" is supposed to mean. But when I'm out at the Cross, like tonight, I don't see whores. I see women I share something with. I see them here at the Cross walking with pain – but they still keep on walking, dreaming of something else, something better than the past. Just like the rest of us, I guess . . .'

Chapter Five

Kinky Ms Whiplash and the Chancellor

It seemed to me then that pain, even more than pound coins and notes, had to be considered the sex business's prevailing currency. Professional sexual encounters may ooze with the gloss of cash and desire but the prostitute and the client are essentially playing off one ache against another bruise. The success of prostitutes like Lee Docherty, as much as his less fortunate King's Cross counterparts, depends on the extent to which they control these ever-shifting parameters of pain.

But around the time I was getting to know him through the slow process of *Deranged*-type film outings, I met a different kind of woman. Considerably older than the 'Terminator Angel'/'Bitch Of Pain'/'Docherty' triumvirate, Sara Dale presented a further distinct contrast. She had begun sex-therapy work more through the pursuit of sensual pleasure than either monetary gain or the burial of pain. By the time I was formally introduced to her I had already heard much about Sara Dale. In interviews with male clients she had been spoken of in glowing terms, as someone who was not only compassionate but also remarkably skilful in massage and domination techniques.

A woman called Melissa, who was forty-five years old and a single parent of two teenage boys, was especially emphatic that I should meet Sara Dale. Melissa, who topped up her meagre income support allowance with afternoon massage, including some joint work with Sara, stressed that she had

never met anyone else 'as committed to sex-therapy as a fundamentally healing experience'.

I thought back to Kyle's cynical use of 'therapy' as a euphemistic way of softening the fact that his lover was working for him as a prostitute. 'But this is completely different,' insisted Melissa, 'because Sara Dale really *does* help her clients, she *does* offer them an unusual kind of catharsis, a way of putting them back in touch with feelings which make them glow. She deals in pleasure much more than pain – she gives and receives enjoyment with equal grace.' Well, what could I do in the face of such incandescent PR but take the short walk from my home to Campden Hill where Sara Dale then lived, with her lover, David.

Her small house, covered in ivy and climbing roses, was as pretty as any seen on the gleaming lid of a biscuit-tin. Bicycles, used for early morning and weekend rides, were slung casually against the wooden fence and whenever I walked through their front gate a beautifully fat grey cat reclined on the lawn with a massive yawn and an outstretched paw in welcome. Perhaps because he was such an unusual feline – a seal-point tabby – he answered to the obvious name of 'Cat'. If the neighbours noticed the male clients streaming up and down the short pathway every day, they must surely have concluded that 'Cat's' well-spoken owners were indeed respectable psychotherapists. It was hard to believe that anything remotely deviant could unfold in such a setting.

During my numerous visits to this particular house I passed a couple of clients on their way out and, instead of skulking guiltily past as I expected, they greeted me enthusiastically. It was then that I began to wonder if there was some substance to the assertions I had heard that Sara Dale was fast becoming London's 'Queen Of Pleasure'. From a more personal perspective, I was most intrigued by her because she too was a South African. Although she had left the country more than twenty-eight years before, when

she was just into her twenties, Sara Dale retained a faint trace of a Cape Town accent. Most people assumed that she was English but my South African vowels soon had her flattening out her own in apparent empathy. We even spoke a little Afrikaans for old time's sake and I found it curious that she should have ended up working as a 'new-age sensualist', as she then described herself.

But strangeness was at the source of Sara Dale's eclectic heritage. She was the Cape Town-born daughter of a Lithuanian Jewish mother and an aristocratic French Catholic father. Branching away from this volatile mix she eventually veered towards 'Hindu and Indian Tantra spirituality – mixed with a sensual philosophy of open, limitless sexuality'. She would reel off statements like this with a flashing smile, a toss of her curly auburn locks and a husky stress on a word like 'sensual'.

'I understand the significance of sensuality,' she sighed, 'because I came from a very repressed background. You don't need me to tell you the extent to which South African suburbia is a dangerously inhibited environment. There was incredible sexual repression when I was growing up there. That obviously tied in with the political conservatism which, all in all, made it an oppressive place to live. Those hang-ups seemed to carry over into my first marriage. My ex-husband had a very fixed idea of the role that should be played by a "wife". I felt incredibly hemmed-in and stultified – not unlike some of those women who are clients of your friend Docherty.

But I wasn't content just to let things drift along. To cut a long story short, as our marriage began to fall apart I started to go out on my own. I also started to study and practise sexual psycho-therapy, as a result of which I had to research the whole subject of submission and domination. I was incredibly lucky to meet a man who acted as my "master" in a very safe S&M relationship. He opened me up to the power of touch and of role-playing. Eventually I graduated from being a slave to being a mistress and so

I am able to understand both the submissive and dominant sides of sexuality. I continued to study and practise sexual psycho-therapy, and wrote a thesis on the importance of touch at Dr Michael Perring's London Institute for the Study of Human Sexuality.'

Sara also told me how she had posed for a magazine called, evocatively, *Shiny Housewife International*. 'As a student of sexuality,' she suggested, 'I felt it was important to understand what it felt like to be photographed in such a magazine.'

'What sort of magazine is *Shiny Housewife International*?' I asked, with my voice sounding huskier than it should have done.

'Oh, it's just a fantasy magazine,' Sara replied airily. 'A glossy rubber and leather domination mag. It's nothing serious. But it was part of the process I undertook to change myself, to liberate myself from past shackles. And all through this time of transformation and of learning, during the last five years, I have been working as Sara Dale and living with David, who has been incredibly supportive of my work . . .'

'How would you describe your work?'

'In the simplest terms I offer two kinds of massage. For £60 I use my hands to massage all parts of the client's body for forty minutes. For £90 I also use my mouth and tongue and hair in a full hour massage. Although I have had intercourse with some of my clients this is a very rare occurrence. It happens in exceptional circumstances, when I feel that the therapy requires something more personal to overcome a particular psychological blockage. I believe that intercourse requires intimacy and such intimacy only really grows out of the trust developed in a relationship. My massage technique gives the clients, so they tell me, more pure pleasure than intercourse often does. It is a stylized form of sex, appropriate between strangers precisely because it is stylized. If I have known a client for a long time then occasionally intercourse might be suitable – perhaps if it

is someone with low self-esteem or a man who has just suffered a terrible loss or someone who is disabled . . .'

This streak of seeming philanthropy had also drawn me towards Sara Dale. I had been told that if the 'extremely rare event' occurred between her and a client then it was considered to be a natural part of the massage service. She would not, I had been assured, request any further remuneration.

'Of course I wouldn't!' she smiled. 'If it happens it does so either spontaneously or because there is a need on the part of the client. I don't offer intercourse and when people ask for it I say "no". I consider myself to be primarily a touch-therapist. You see, I am so in tune with touch that even if I put my hand on yours I can uncover what's going on deep inside you – I find then that we can soul-talk . . .'

As Sara Dale's hand lightly touched mine she discovered that my own soul-talk is based on the assumption that I am actually the ghost of Franz Kafka. This, surprisingly, is not always an advantage for it leaves one a little bereft of soul-kissing idealism. But the fundamental aim of her service has always been to release clients from their sexual hang-ups. Eventually, she suggested, they will be so in touch with their own 'inner beauty' that no further soulful £90 tastes of heaven will be required.

But, despite my hopefully Kafkaesque pessimism, I was still struck by the significance Sara Dale placed on 'healing' and 'curing' her clientele. This attitude, whatever the depths of its idealism, runs contrary to the mercenary backdrop of prostitution. None of the prostitutes I had met shared this desire. They were more concerned with maintaining their own emotional and financial stability in the face of often traumatic circumstances.

'Aaah, but this is precisely why Sara's service is so exceptional,' smiled David her erudite partner. 'You're quite right in what you say about prostitution. The prime purpose of the prostitute is often to indulge her client's fantasies, not to cure him of them. Indeed, to attempt a cure would

be bad for business. But the therapist's purpose is to free her client of his underlying trauma. A therapist like Sara educates a client in women's expectations and then teaches him how to satisfy them. This can help the client get his relationship with his wife or girlfriend on to such a satisfactory footing that he no longer needs to go looking outside for either escape or stimulation. He has no need of Sara then and she can feel the satisfaction of having positively changed someone.

'Now the typical client of an upmarket prostitute tends to look for a young woman with a fantasy figure. He usually pays her £200 a time for a form of indulgence which more often heightens rather than satiates his needs. If the service is poor he will emerge from a session with a prostitute feeling not only dissatisfied but also cheated and angry. Now a client who comes to Sara, a sexual therapist rather than a prostitute, is looking for someone who will listen to and understand him, someone who will be able to draw out what he has never been able to tell anyone else. In doing this through touch and psychodrama the client is slowly freed from repression and, soon, he has no need of the therapist. That's the point Sara is always working towards. You've seen some of her clients leaving the house after an appointment – their faces are wreathed in smiles. And I say all of this not only with feeling but with some authority because I too work as a Sara-trained masseur.'

He said these last few words with such pride that any thoughts I had been harbouring about a parallel Simone-Kyle relationship were immediately banished. Although his foray into the world of massage had so far been only on a part-time basis, David was not unduly troubled. He was more concerned with developing the AIDS education charity he was in the process of setting up. The book which he and Sara had just finished writing – *The Taste Of Heaven* – had its source in the AIDS education work he had been engaged in before their meeting. Unlike Kyle, his own work ambitions and interests echoed those of his lover. It was this

symmetry which led David and Sara Dale to work together, even though she was essentially carrying out the practical elements of the 'touch-therapy theory' they were both still refining.

Despite my scepticism towards their more romantically vague *Taste Of Heaven* concepts, I did not doubt the integrity of their harmony – how could I when David presented me with a Keatsian poem he had written in celebration of Sara Dale's work as a sensual therapist? Perhaps sensing my bewilderment, they then offered me a copy of their sex manual from which Sara initially read aloud a representative extract while David looked on lovingly.

'When your lover has reached a high state of arousal,' she began to read, 'it's your turn to be masturbated. Invite your lover to do whatsoever pleases you most. Or leave it to them to choose. Just allow yourself to sink into the pleasure. Allow yourself to be aroused and excited, set aquiver and penetrated. Just bask in these varied and, perhaps, new sensations. And, above all, enjoy! Enjoy! Enjoy!'

Apparently a devout student of such 'senzzual' enjoyment, 'Cat' chose this heart-stopping moment to jump on to my lap. David and Sara smiled encouragingly at me as I hesitantly began to stroke 'Cat', not wanting to appear too repressed in such expansive company. 'Cat' accepted the gesture in the way it was intended and purred with light-hearted friendliness. I listened more carefully from then on so as not to emulate exactly the *Taste Of Heaven* instructions, whatever change might emerge in 'Cat's' inclinations.

'However perfect your play and however exquisite its pleasures,' Sara continued as she glanced once more at the undoubtedly sweet sight made by 'Cat' and me, 'you should not fail to try fucking your lover with your hand – whether you're fucking her cunt by putting your fingers into it, or whether you're fucking his cock by curling your fingers

around it – and bringing them to peak orgasm. Whomever you are hand-pleasuring or being hand-pleasured by – man or woman, of the same sex or the opposite – the best thing of all is to masturbate each other to orgasm at the same time, perhaps kissing each other continuously as your arousal increases. In fucking, it's very difficult to maintain continuous kissing while both lovers reach their climax. The bucking movements of their bodies are almost certain to carry them apart. But when you bring each other to orgasm with your hands, you can sometimes keep your mouths kissing together as passionately as you like through the foothills of pleasure and mountains of ecstasy right up to and through the peaks of pure bliss and, indeed, down the other side. The energy flow which this will produce between you is a quite literally mind-blowing experience. Once you have experienced this particular intermingling of energy, nothing will ever seem quite the same again.'

Both 'Cat' and I were already mind-blown by the purple prose. A dazed pause ensued as we tried to fathom whether we were up in the mountains or still down in the foothills of ecstasy. Finally deciding that we hadn't even ventured out of the parched flatlands of my practical interviewing technique, 'Cat' fell asleep and allowed me to ask Sara if she carried such sensuality into her everyday massage work.

'The concept of pleasure is absolutely crucial to my work! Even when someone requires domination therapy I always ensure that the "punishment" is followed by a show of affection and pleasure-giving. This is the theme to all my work – the giving of pleasure!'

'We wish to restore the glow in people's eyes that they have when they are in love,' David murmured as a way of explanation. In case such romance could not touch my Kafka-encircled heart, Sara added more pithily that 'we call it the freshly fucked look'.

It was a look she worked at. Whenever I bumped into her in the Europa supermarket in Bayswater Road, invariably over a sexy bunch of bananas at the crowded fruit

stall, Sara would greet me and ask when I was next coming to have a massage myself. She could tell that I was writing too hard and interviewing too many bleak people for my own good. A massage would loosen the angst from my slouching body. Although she was undoubtedly right my supposed writerly detachment prevented me from taking up her kind offer of finger-kneading nirvana.

Meeting Sara Dale there was always a surreal experience. While we chatted pleasantly about the escalating price of bananas or about the best type of hummus tub to use, I would play an absurd secret game. How many other people in the store with us were involved in the sex industry? Did the bald man who was debating the comparative merits of black and green olives with the caped Nigerian woman behind the delicatessen counter look like a potential Sara Dale client? What would the young woman in her new Next suit think as she leaned over to pick out a couple of bananas and heard Sara Dale croon those *Taste Of Heaven* words again?

Whatever the banality of such thoughts I realized I'd miss not seeing her in the same supermarket when she told me that she and David were finally moving to a bigger house in Kensington Park Road. This would enable her son and daughter, both in their early twenties, to move in with them. She could also, from then on, conduct her therapy in a proper basement. Despite the fact that we'd bump into each other less often she insisted that, at least metaphorically, we stay in close touch. 'You must come and have dinner with us soon in the new house. You'll see, it's *perfect*!' Neither of us could have guessed then, as we lingered one last time over the hummus counter, that their lives were about to be turned upside down in that apparently perfect home. In the middle of April that year – 1991 – at the outset of a wet spring, catastrophe struck.

Then, at their weekend retreat in leafy Woodbridge, Suffolk, David and Sara Dale were enjoying a drink and deciding

whether to venture out for a meal at the local Indian restaurant. Her work for another week in London was over and she was luxuriating in the bliss of a quiet Saturday evening. Suddenly the phone rang – breaking their serenity for months rather than minutes. A senior journalist from *The Sunday Times* asked David for a quote on the front page story that the *News Of The World* were running on the couple, and especially Sara Dale's use of Norman Lamont's Kensington home as a 'vice den', in the next morning's edition.

'It was a complete shock,' David emphasized when I saw them a few weeks later. 'We had absolutely no idea that the tabloids were even aware of our existence. It was one of those terrible moments when you have to say, in disbelief, "Could you run that past me again?" So I listened in stunned silence for the next fifteen minutes while the story on both the front and inside pages was read over the phone to me. The pictures they had used were also described to me and I quickly realized that they had been taken from the *Shiny Housewife International* shoot we had told you about. They were three years old and being used completely out of context, as was the fantasy text the *News Of The World* had quoted liberally from. One thought that kept running through my head was that this story was a complete travesty, a cruel caricature of the healing therapy Sara has perfected over the years. It took us some time to gather ourselves and prepare a short statement in reply to this cheap smear.

'Within an hour the phone was ringing whenever we put it down and the normally discreet streets of Woodbridge were teeming with journalists. Their portable phones were ringing and their flash-guns popping as if we were celebrities caught *in flagrante*. We managed to dodge our way to the local Indian restaurant where the friendly owner barricaded his door against the press. This didn't stop one journalist getting through. Then, much to our astonishment, she turned out to be a representative of the *News Of The World*,

of all papers! "You must already know," she said, "that the press from all over the world are about to descend on you tomorrow. It's going to be hell for you. Wouldn't you like to get away from it all and spend the next ten days in a five-star hotel in the country where nobody can get to you? All expenses paid, of course!" We were flabbergasted at her audacity! She just ploughed on. She said that this would give us a chance to collaborate with them on the much wider story they were hoping to write. Of course, we would be very well compensated for our co-operation. Sara and I were enraged. "Thank you," we said quietly, "but the only place we will talk with your employers will be in court." Feeling anger and indignation helped but I was still overwhelmed by shock that night . . .'

Sara Dale was jolted even harder although she reflected that 'I had an inkling that something was wrong on the Friday night. Mercedes, our Brazilian helper, let this man into the house even though he didn't have an appointment. She shouldn't have done that as I *never* see anyone from off the street. But he was in deep distress. He'd been told that I was an excellent psychotherapist and that if anyone could help him it would be me. He begged me to see him for at least a short while. He was unshaven and untidily dressed. It seemed as if his life was crumbling around him. An essential part of my work is dealing with damaged people and I felt that this man had been broken up by destructive emotions. He was brilliantly convincing.

'So I said to him, "Look, I'm exhausted, it's eight-thirty. There's no way I can give you an adequate therapy session right now. But I'll interview you and we'll see about an appointment next week." Despite the fact that I was so tired after a long day I felt that I couldn't merely run him out of the house. I decided to use that half-hour interview to try and get some feel for him, to gauge what seemed to have gone so terribly wrong in his life. Then, when I saw him for a formal session the following week, I would be able to move straight to the core of his difficulties. So we sat

down and talked, Chris Blythe and I, in the home of the Chancellor of the Exchequer.

'He told me all his problems. I thought that there was a dark trail of negativity and self-loathing in much of what he confessed. I tried to be as sympathetic as I could towards him but by showing him compassion I provided the openings he was looking for.

'He said he wanted to use psychodrama because he felt that he needed therapy which would enable him to move outside the strict confines of his everyday life. He wanted to place his trust in me and psychodrama was one of the ways in which he could deal with the issues of responsibility, repression, guilt and despair which shadowed his life. I agreed that psychodrama can often be an extremely effective form of therapy. He was leading me on very cleverly. He then asked if he could expect some kind of sexual satisfaction from our session. I looked at this rather dishevelled man and I thought that there is someone else inside this person, someone who is not so beaten down by harmful emotions. So I replied, "If sexual relief is appropriate, then sure, whatever is necessary to help you realize your own integral beauty."

'This must have given him confidence because he became much more straightforward. I started to feel a little uncomfortable about the way our conversation was heading. In hindsight, he was trying to put specific, quotable words into my mouth. "Would we have sex?" he asked. "Well if by 'sex' you mean intercourse then the answer is 'no'," I replied. "How about caning? Would you cane me?" he asked. "If you need to be caned then you must have done something really naughty," I answered. "You'd better send me a letter written by someone in authority, say a parent or a teacher, telling me exactly what you've done, you naughty boy." You see, a letter like this tells me something about a person's creativity, where someone's thoughts are mingled with their soul-self. I told Chris Blythe that I knew exactly how to use the cane when it was really necessary

because I know exactly how to use it to open up a person. I explained to him that usually a person doesn't even need to be caned because even the swish it makes through the air can break down barriers. But he wouldn't leave it at that. He kept on and on about how he needed to be punished. When he asked me if I did spanking I knew he was just fishing for something salacious. I terminated our interview and I remember telling David how distraught this man had appeared. But I never guessed who he was or the type of damage he was about to inflict on me and my family.'

The surprise of this story is not so much that Sara Dale was hooked by a relentless *News Of The World* reporter, but that she and David had even contemplated moving into the Chancellor of the Exchequer's house in the first place. Knowing the extent of this country's preoccupation with sex, it was perplexing that they made such a move. The only doubt was always going to centre around the *when*, rather than the if, of their being rumbled by the media. They looked devastated when I said that there had even been speculation that they actually chose to move into the Lamonts' home with the certainty that voluminous publicity, and eventual fortune, awaited.

'That's crazy,' said Sara Dale. 'We never thought about the media for one minute. As for the so-called financial benefits! We've lost an incredible amount of money. David's business has been ruined. My work has been severely affected. I lost many of my most valued clients who were scared off by the publicity. The number of time-wasting crank telephone calls went up a hundred-fold. As a result of all this economic turmoil it also looks like we're losing our home in Woodbridge. Anyway, as for this cynical theory, I have to say that we were only told it was the Lamonts' home after we'd confirmed our desire to rent it. We were also far from being the only people considered as prospective tenants by the Lamonts. There were supposedly lots of other people who viewed the house and this meant that the whole process was exceptionally protracted. The

Lamonts also insisted on personally filtering through every application in thorough detail. Even though we knew that the checking routine would be very strict we welcomed this because it meant that there would be no room for misunderstanding about the work I did. As Norman Lamont finally said, our application and references were "impeccable".'

According to Sara Dale, the Lamonts apparently knew that she was going to use their basement for 'therapy'. Presumably they were not aware of the sexual background to this therapy service for it should not have been too obscure a thought to them either that the tabloids could sniff out a trashy story from these bare details.

'She wasn't interested in anything I said about my work,' observed Ms Whiplash of Mrs Lamont. 'She was much more concerned about coming back to prune the roses, which I found odd. But we did explain to the Lamonts that we'd use the basement for therapy – so it was puzzling that they tried to evict us on the grounds that they hadn't known we were going to use their house for work.'

Chris Blythe and the rest of the tabloid pack gave both couples a conspicuous run-around for the next six weeks. They filled their pages with stories linking the Chancellor and Ms Whiplash in a lurid tryst. The *News Of The World*, the connoisseurs of this form of journalism, ran the story on their front pages for successive weeks, only breaking the momentum in week three when Sara Dale was relegated to the inside pages in favour of a 'Maniac Fights Dog' headlined-story which detailed the exploits of a man who fought pit-bull terriers for money.

'What really hurt,' murmured Sara Dale, 'was the involvement of Mercedes. David had initially employed her as a cleaner and we quickly realized that she was a very intelligent woman. However, she was also very frustrated by work permit problems. When we moved into the Lamonts' home she literally implored us to take her on as a type of Girl-Friday. She said she would answer the telephone while I was working, she would take on any

number of administrative chores. In exchange, all she wanted was to live with us. Eventually we agreed that she could stay. But the problems were only beginning. Even when I said I would train her in massage techniques I found that she did not share any of my philosophies. But we did try to help her – and look what happened. The last time we saw Mercedes she was being escorted by Chris Blythe. She had been whisked off to one of their country retreats and she came back with him to collect the last of her things from us. He looked terrible because he'd had a week of Mercedes screaming at him. That was the type of thing she did and I thought that they probably deserved each other. It was clear that she had been deeply involved in setting us up, probably right from the start.'

The precise role played by the ubiquitous Mercedes in blowing the lid off Sara Dale's work in the Lamonts' basement was initially clouded in confusion. But, with or without her help, the *News Of The World*'s 'Kinky Miss Whiplash & The Chancellor' campaign reached fever pitch when the paper published recent photographs of a commitment ceremony in Suffolk where David and Sara had invited their guests to strip them naked prior to their exchange of 'free love' and wedding vows and plants like Pussy-Willows and Raspberry-Canes.

'The publication of those deeply private photographs,' remembered David, 'left us reeling. We were losing money fast and the tabloids and the Lamonts' solicitors knew we didn't have the financial clout to take them on. When the scandal first broke we felt that Norman Lamont was, like us, a hapless victim of scurrilous journalism. But Peter Carter-Ruck, his libel lawyers, made sure that they were seen to be doing something every single day by the thirty-odd reporters camped outside our front door. It was like *LA Law*! Eight of them would arrive at the door – Christopher Smith, who was a Carter-Ruck partner, was accompanied by a barrister, two assistant solicitors, a surveyor, an estate agent and two embarrassed senior policemen.

'It was around then,' Sara Dale continued, 'that we began to think that this might be something more than just a *News Of The World* sleaze-piece. Christopher Smith asked us about "the disabled man" – this was a reference to a friend of ours who had come for dinner a few weeks before and stayed the night. This meant that, long before the *News Of The World* story, someone had been watching us.

'When we viewed the Lamonts' house we saw these suspicious men parked across the street. They were earnestly eating apples. We thought then that they must be security men, for the house was fortified with complex alarm-systems, shatter-proof windows, even a bullet-proof cat-flap! But we soon realized that someone more shadowy was watching the house. Even now we're not sure exactly what we're getting into . . .'

Amidst the uncertainty of a then vaguely imagined conspiracy theory, Norman Lamont was the one bulky constant. As David repeated, 'In the beginning we also felt that Mr Lamont had been set up along with us. But the way he called on Peter Carter-Ruck made us wonder. They are merciless libel litigators. Instead of allowing us to defend ourselves against the *News Of The World* he attacked us. 'Some of his cabinet colleagues were with me at Cambridge – but instead of turning to them for a first-hand assessment he chose to follow the *News Of The World*'s character-assassination. Although that newspaper had been careful not to call Sara a prostitute, Lamont accused us of carrying out "the business of prostitution and the purveying of sexual or quasi-sexual therapy services" – whatever "quasi-sexual" means! But he spoilt the moral tenor by claiming that, by way of compensation, he wanted as large a share of Sara's earnings as the courts would award. This, essentially, would have meant that the Chancellor of the Exchequer could have been held to be living off immoral earnings!'

'Imagine that!' chortles Sara Dale. 'Having Norman Lamont as your pimp! Of course it never came to that –

we issued subpoenas for Mr and Mrs Lamont and Christopher Smith to appear as our witnesses. After that he agreed to withdraw his actions and we agreed to leave the house.'

The chunky weight of the tabloids, Norman Lamont and Peter Carter-Ruck finally forced the family out of the Chancellor's home. They moved into the four-storey house in Chelsea where they now live, next door to George Best and in the same street as Lord Reay, a Tory whip in the House Of Lords, Viscount Windsor and Bruce Gyngell, managing director of the fast-sinking TV-AM. I first visited them there on a humid, drizzly summer morning – supposedly perfect weather for wearing a red hot-pants suit round the house rather than down the King's Road. Sara indicated as much by bouncing down the stairs in that infamous outfit. She and I exchanged our ritual 'South Africans in London' salutations – 'Howzit long time no see, hey?' – and reminisced that the last time we had actually seen each other had been over that tub of hummus the week before they moved into the Lamontville badlands.

For all Sara and Daniel's affable chit-chat we were soon re-running the saga of Chris Blythe's 'expose'. As he shredded the 'legal inconsistencies and moral hypocrisy' of the Chancellor's attitude to their erstwhile tenancy of his home, she described the hounding meted out by the tabloids as being 'the closest thing you can get to sustained, emotional rape'.

But, and this is what is most curious about this particular story, the eventual themes were already turning out to be less ruination and shame than re-manipulation of the tabloids and a celebration of, in the sultry voice of Sara Dale, 'senzzuality'. She included ironic, ringing tabloid endorsements of her massage service in the personal columns of the local newspapers. The *Daily Mirror* claimed that a massage from Sara was 'unbelievably relaxing' while the *Sun* described it as 'bliss'.

Having had notoriety thrust upon them, there was an admirable defiance about their decision to manipulate the media for their own purposes.

Apart from her continuing *Taste Of Heaven* daily work, the couple had decided to branch out into a variety of business activities – including the launching of The Sara Dale Foundation, 'concerned with the role of pleasure in the maintenance of stable relationships'. To this end they endeavoured to produce more books, videos and sensuality courses for couples to overcome what they described as an Orwellian mind-fuck 'controlling people in this country so that,' as Sara Dale said, 'Britain is like a wasteland of sexual repression'.

Sara and David were not rejoicing, however, in the fact that their taste of conspiracy was being sharpened by the visit of a stray American – sounding like a haunted refugee from a Don deLillo novel. He had warned Sara to leave the Lamont home quietly a few weeks after Chris Blythe's visit. He returned again just before I saw them in their Chelsea home, after the preceding weeks had proven that they were determined to continue speaking to the media because, in Sara's words, 'we wanted to articulate our position so that people could judge for themselves whether the work I did was squalid or essential therapy'.

Taking on the tabloids at their own game, David and Sara Dale would follow up one paper's sensational account by running a 'spoiler' in a rival publication. Whenever the *News Of The World* were set to run another story on them they would phone up the *People* or the *Daily Mirror* and offer them an alternative account. It's a dangerous game to play and the American took Sara Dale out for what he called 'a pancake and some friendly advice'.

'I was interested to hear what he had to say. He took me with him to the Old Dutch pancake house in the King's Road. He must be some kind of tacky undercover man – I would've preferred somewhere more chic for the unfolding of this conspiracy theory. It was a crazy night. He said, with

an election coming up, it was imperative for me to keep a low profile. If I continued to speak to the media I'd be asking for trouble. He stressed that what I said to the newspapers could be very damaging for some important people. He wouldn't say who he worked for – just that I was treading along a precarious edge.'

'Mr X' assumed a foreboding bearing. For David, 'It's become – apparent that there's something more ominous at work here than just a couple of unscrupulous tabloid journalists. It was put to us that the Lamont saga was instigated by members of the Conservative far right, angry at the role our friend Norman had played in the downfall of Mrs Thatcher. This seemed vaguely plausible. But there are also people who are not in favour of our sexual openness, who seem set on bringing us down . . .'

I was similarly puzzled by the enigmatic appearances of Sara's American pancake-agent. It was indisputable that Sara Dale had been closely watched – and not always by apple-munching men sitting in darkened cars. These other identities remained elusive.

Yet the real conspiracy, as they readily acknowledged, was that unspoken pact of deceit and hypocrisy existing between politicians, the legal establishment and the tabloids in their refusal to accept the imperative decriminalisation of the sex industry. Instead of confronting the contradictions of prevailing sex legislation it's more comfortable for 'family newspapers' like the *News Of The World* to deal with someone like Sara Dale as if she is merely a 'scandalous tart'.

Although she steadfastly gave Chris Blythe the 'integral beauty' line when he tried to probe her links with prostitution, I wondered where she subsequently placed herself in the context of the age-old vocation. 'Well it hurts when they call me "tart" for it cheapens the work and it hurts my children. But we realize that people are going to call me all sorts of names, that there might well be some kind of vendetta against us – but *I know* that my work is healing, whatever they might say. I also know that being

called names matters nothing when it is set against the violence and the exploitation and the hypocrisy of much of the sex industry.

'But if I allowed them to warp my thinking I might as well pack up now! Whether or not it's a campaign against us, there are people who want me to cave in. That's not going to happen, even though they've caused us terrible hurt. The worst thing about the entire saga is that it even put my own libido on hold.'

As Sara Dale and I looked pensively at each other, David made us suddenly laugh. 'Listening to the two of you talk I suddenly had the grotesque image that the next time I touch Sara she'll think it's the fingers of Norman Lamont!'

But, for all the irony of that thought, I was more chilled by the knowledge that, the following evening, I would be meeting Alistair. Like both David and Norman Lamont, Alistair had made his way in the world as a Cambridge graduate. He, however, had moved on, into territory far darker than that traced by Sara Dale's sensual fingers. My mood was clouded further by the death of 'Cat', my soul-talking pal, who had been knocked down by a car during the most convoluted stages of the *News Of The World* scandal. I wondered if this was some sort of grim omen that, unlike 'Cat', I was moving away from heavenly heights and heading down towards a place touched by a more personal hell.

Chapter Six

The Connoisseur

As darkness spread across Soho Square, at the tail-end of one of those long London summer evenings, I saw him at the bottom of Sutton Row. He climbed from the back of a black cab and rolled a note from his inside pocket into the driver's waiting hand. He was already walking quickly down the cement path before the taxi had begun to move again. This slick flourish, this middle-aged financier's spry step, clearly fuelled his perception of himself as a powerful city go-getter, as an ardent 'go-get-her'.

Sweeping past the square's chipped statue of Charles II, he stepped over a drunk wearing a string vest and a soiled sailor's cap and walked right up to the bench where I sat. He looked down at me with the measured evaluation he prided himself on at his board meetings. When he said my name, with a sense of conviction rather than enquiry, I got to my feet and offered my hand. He replied with a crunching shake and an assertion that I could call him 'Alistair'.

He led the way down Greek Street, wasting no time with the frivolities of small talk or of our keeping in companionable step together. We marched past the Georgian House of St Barnabas in Soho, for battered and 'fallen' women, The Gay Hussar and L'Escargot. Crossing over into Old Compton Street we strode into Wheelers, a restaurant known for its refined presentation of fish dishes since its establishment in 1856.

We were seated at a corner table, breath regained, menus

perused and orders placed before he looked at me again with a glance which said 'So?' or 'Well?' I answered him at first with a copious emphasis on my liking for fish but he sighed a little, as if he had no time to burn on my opinion of his restaurant choice. So I followed this with a blazingly earnest explanation of my intentions in writing about the buying and selling of sex in London.

The longer I talked, the deeper his silence grew. It assumed a life of its own, descending over us with brooding disquiet, growing thicker with each passing minute of my one-sided talk. After five such protracted minutes his silence appeared impenetrable. My few questions, asking why he had chosen to meet me and whether he'd consider discussing the subject, were answered with a shrug and a wry smile.

It was only when my words had faded and the last curled medallion of lemon sole had disappeared from his plate that he opened his mouth for a different reason. He spoke with a voice rich in rounded vowels and clipped inflections about the 'absolutely crucial necessity for complete confidentiality', the absence of which would result in punishing law-suits administered by the city's most rigorous and, if they so chose, 'downright vicious' solicitors. I thought how ironic it would be if, like Norman Lamont, Alistair felt compelled to call upon the abrasive talents of Peter Carter-Ruck. It would not be worth my while, he said, for whatever reason, to breach his confidence.

His sharply fanged legal team would have no compunction whatsoever in tearing me apart in a court of law, in shredding me to the bone, in more than a manner of speaking, so that I would no longer ever wish to write again. Alistair himself, moreover, would personally see to it that the inevitable regret incurred by such action would seep into every facet of my life. He asked, more than once, if he had made himself clear to me.

I nodded a few times. My silence was now a subdued echo of his earlier reticence. Yet they still rained down on me, these warnings of legal menace and dire personal

consequence, through three cups of decaffeinated coffee and matching glasses of port until he at last sank into his high-backed chair.

So there we sat, banker and writer, full of fish and mutual doubt, waiting and wondering who would be the first to make a move, either for the door or the other's throat. A small goldfish circled its bowl on the bar's marble surface, as if it too was awaiting the outcome of our surly exchange. I was the one to give in, the wordless void between us becoming unbearable.

I outlined the argument that the identity of a prostitute's client is, by definition, obscured. The shame a man is supposed to feel should it be discovered that he has paid money for sex necessitates the ring of secrecy surrounding prostitution. I understood his desire for facelessness, for it is this very sense of disgrace which is one of prostitution's most enduring themes. Then again, I also realized that any dosh to be derived from selling his kinky tale to Sara Dale's soaraway chums at the *News Of The World* would be, as he had been thoughtful enough to point out, nothing compared with the hefty sum of retribution he'd dole out.

Just as I warmed to this topic he slid a bridge across the fish-flecked chasm separating us. It was a pale grey envelope, with my name typed on the front and its flap unstuck at the back. The crux of any discussion between us lay within the envelope's enclosed two pages. They too were typed, the double spacing and the justified borders making the black words stand out clearly against the white backing. But, this being a legal letter, the meaning behind the words was shrouded in the pedantic rhetoric so admired by solicitors. Alistair claimed that it was 'a watertight document', binding me to silence should I sign it. It was irrelevant that we both knew this to be untrue. If I wanted to spend some time with him, 'discussing the history of Soho', I would have to sign the document that night. I signed it as soon as he handed over his gold pen.

We might have been in Iceland, playing the old roles of

Gorby an' Ronnie, such was the impact of my putting pen to paper. The atmosphere positively crackled with heady change; this presumably signified the cracking of our own private cold war. Alistair called for more port, a couple of Irish Whiskeys and two large cigars. Even at the risk of chilling the thaw, I passed on the cigar and concentrated instead on chasing down the drink.

We reeled out into the night an hour later. Alistair was ready to roll. This, he crooned, was going to be a time I wouldn't forget in a hurry. We purled past the Soho Brasserie, only slowing briefly when Alistair brushed against a red-haired girl wearing a small pill-box hat and a black cocktail dress. He bowed ostentatiously and murmured an apology which did not convince her that the contact was completely unintentional.

But Alistair had another target in mind. He crossed over to the other side of the street, jostling his way past the Andrew Lloyd-Webber and Tim Rice fans swilling their interval G 'n' Ts outside the Prince Edward Theatre. It didn't take long to work out where he was headed.

The shop window, framed in red, was painted black. A neon 'Electric Blue' sign provided the only indication of activity inside. Above the window there was just one word – Janus. On the outside, to the uninitiated, it could have conceivably been mistaken for one of those hip wine bars where designer alienation goes with expensive drinks. A couple of curious Japanese businessmen were pondering the exact nature of the Janus myth as Alistair bowled past them with serious intent and a 'Sex shop, boys, sex shop' aside. This sent them a few steps back into the road and incurred the hooting indignation of a passing BMW. The Japanese men followed me into the shop.

Alistair was already ensconced at the back, flipping expertly through the shiny copies of *Rope And Burn, Dominatrix, Blushes, Knotty* and *New Uniform*. I looked lucklessly for a copy of Sara Dale's *Shiny Housewife*

International. Alistair appeared unmoved by most of the others, only stopping occasionally to tilt a page my way. Without exception the photographs he lingered over were those which disturbed most. One showed a young girl splayed against a pitch fork in a muddy field while a masked older woman streaked dirt down the right side of her face; another had a bespectacled man being branded with a thick poker by a leather-clad woman called 'the bitch burner'. She had none of Simone Maillard's elegance. Yet this picture made me wonder how much of Simone's personal grace could filter through the sieve of the *Chienne de Souffrance* professional mask she used whenever called on to do this kind of work. Alistair's attention had already drifted to the walls above, where ropes, spikes, chains and whips were pinned with refined austerity. Once more his glance flicked coolly over the display, perhaps comparing them to the more limited offerings on Mandy's wooden rack.

He felt at home here, unlike most of the other men filling the shop. Apart from Alistair and me, and the bemused Japanese, all the others were on their own and showing signs of furtive embarrassment as they scanned the shelves of pornography. I thought back to the comparative mirth of my afternoon in the cellar of pain with Mandy and Alice. Despite the dark undertow of their discussion they had shown a deft touch when deconstructing the language and imagery of S&M. Dragged down by the soiled seriousness of the Janus clientele I wished Alice would burst through the red door with a 'Kinky Karate Kat' yelp to shake up all these shifty 'sniffy-tasties' and 'dressie-feelies'. She would have sent them scuttling away in shame for they seemed to be pretending that they were inspecting plywood in B&Q rather than *Rope And Burn*. In a way I felt more comfortable confronting big Al's candour. He was happy to confirm that this was his own patch and he showed as much by calling out to the sallow-faced man at the front desk: 'Have those new German videos arrived yet, Dave?'

Dave, more circumspect about the Janus etiquette, silently

motioned us to join him. He spoke in a hushed, whistling sort of voice which sounded all the stranger when he mentioned bullwhip-wielding Bavarian nuns and 'foreskin crucifixion'. But all of this was positively old bondage hood to Alistair, or 'Mr Bates' as he was mysteriously referred to by Dave, and it was finally established that he was only interested in 'brand spanking new' videos. Alistair smiled a little at his play on words before introducing me to Dave, as 'young Don here, a pornographic writer'.

Dave had heard it all before and he gave me a cursory nod which made me understand that there was no way he wished to speak to me unless it entailed my spending money on his more expensive sex items. He quickly sussed me as an 'FTW', a fucking time-waster who'd rather ponce around than spend a pound or three on a Janus product. There was something cruel in Dave's long sunken-in face, some indefinable sense of malice behind the way he curled his near whitened lips into his thin mouth when Alistair was not looking, only for him to suddenly purse them in fake supplication when promising delivery of hardcore German bondage videos 'any day now, Mr Bates sir, any day now'.

But perhaps if he had been selling sprouts down the road in Berwick Street market I might have imagined him as one of the dying breed of cheery Cockney chappies. I wasn't sure whether it was the drink or the fetid smell of lubricated rubber, but Janus was starting to gnaw at me, to get under my skin like a splinter under a nail. Surrounded by those illustrations and instruments of pain and subjugation, he sent a chill through me as Alistair did when he picked out what he called a 'right big brute' of a heavily studded belt.

I remembered Mandy Kavanagh looking away when she'd first spoken about Alistair; about the way he liked to be pinned down in that dead butterfly way. She would then have to pick out one of the belts he'd bought for her that week at Janus. Then she'd have to beat him until it felt as

if her arm was about to unhinge itself from its socket; and then he would tell her to lash into him some more, until the thick leather crinkled with use.

Even Mandy, with her rigorous detachment from the pain of prostitution, had flinched when she told me that sometimes, on rare occasions, Alistair hinted that one day he would like to flip the tables of flagellation. Then he would be the one who did the beating. She hoped that this was mere face-saving talk, an attempt to redress the imbalance of his masochistic relationship with her. Mandy said that it was not unknown for a masochist to also develop a sadistic desire; but such was the depth of Alistair's masochism that she rarely tried to imagine the wasteland his sadism would inhabit.

I turned away to look at the others in the shop, only for my eye to fall once more on the magazine cover of the teenage girl having her face lined with filth. I couldn't help but wonder whether the Janus belt Alistair bought was meant for his, or someone else's, pain.

Then we were off again, with a wave of the hand for Dave, and a 'Cheerio chaps' farewell to the increasingly flabbergasted Japanese. Across the road, on the corner of Dean Street, there was another sex shop. As he dodged his way through the Friday night traffic, Alistair spoke over his shoulder to me about the 'decline of Soho'. It was only when we were once more faced with plastic-lined sheafs of glossy magazines – these, for the 'straight sex' market, bearing titles like *New Cunts* and *Teenage Anal Sex* – that I realized that Alistair associated 'decline' with the decreased availability of hardcore pornography in Soho.

He remembered a time, not so long ago, in the early Eighties, when there were around a dozen decent sex shops in London. 'Decent' in the sense that if you were on first-name terms with the owner you could choose from a whole stash of specialist, first-rate pornography. Scandinavian, French, German, Thai, American; bondage, bestiality, paedophilia, transvestism, transsexuality, housewives' group

sex – you name it, reminisced Alistair, you could find it then in Greek or Frith or Old Compton streets.

It was not the issue, he stressed, that he might draw a personal line on some of these forms of deviant sexuality. Rather, he celebrated the availability of choice as well as the fact that, just like in Amsterdam or Hamburg or Paris or Copenhagen, this gamut of human sexuality had been self-contained in a single sector. But the Soho of today, he mourned, is no longer the Soho of then, which he knew and loved so well. While 'these media types' continued their relentless gentrification of the area, Alistair had to resort to dubious mail-order purchases from darkest Essex. Apart from stripping Soho of its 'sexual distinctiveness', this mid-1980s clean-up severely limited his choice of pornography. He now had to buy most of his goods 'blind' and the product varied alarmingly in quality.

The man behind this sex-shop counter appeared more genial than Dave. No doubt attracted by the rich plumminess of Alistair's voice, and scenting a possible killing of sorts, he shuffled over to our corner. 'Couldn't help over-hearing you gents,' he sniffed affably. 'I've got some special under-the-counter material which might be more up your street.' He sniffed again and then winked conspiratorially at me. Alistair had switched back to his imposing trick of silence. For perhaps ten seconds he stared at the man with an unsettling sense of disquiet.

His 'would you like a quick look then?' question remained unanswered. This was Alistair's territory and I too stayed silent. He hobbled back to his perch. It was then I noticed his club-foot.

Alistair had seen it some time before. It was as if he had been waiting for this particular moment for a long time. 'Have you any interesting material on disabled sex, friend?' he asked. The last word jerked the man's head back but he recovered quickly by turning this involuntary movement into an elaborately snorting sniff. He then resorted to what must be the pornographic salesmen's standard ploy by emulating

Dave's restrained motion for us to join him at the front where we would discuss the matter in more secretive tones.

In the ensuing charade the mag-seller muttered that he could cater for all tastes as long as the money was right. Alistair, meanwhile, rumbled forth on his supposed interest in young girl amputees and club-footed men 'in action together'. This was one of his little jokes but it took a moment or two to strike home. Behind the counter, the man's mouth popped lightly as bubbles of saliva spluttered finally into a slurred 'Piss off!'

Alistair rocked back on his heels. This was turning out to be his idea of a night of fun. With a sigh of regret he followed me through the coloured strands of plastic screening the shop's doorway.

Old Compton Street was still sticky with heat and people, most of them drifting in and out of bars and restaurants with the sort of leisurely bonhomie that does not attach itself to most Friday nights in other parts of London. There was no discernible rush to wash away the week's work with frantically legless drinking. Alistair described the people here as 'the dreaded young liberals, *The Guardian* set' and then, after another couple of shots of Scotch, as 'lifestyle layabouts'. They were the ones who 'trumpeted and whined' the loudest about subjects like pornography and prostitution even though they, he said, were also from the social milieu least able to confront the secret truths of sexual craving.

We were jammed in a pub alongside Janus, drinking iced, triple Scotches ordered and paid for by Alistair before I'd had even a chance to decide what I might like. It was the right choice. I needed something with a kick to keep me going through whatever lay ahead. All around us, said Alistair, you could hear the air thickening with the braying chatter of these people in search of an honourable reason to feel good about themselves. They rejoiced in the restyling of Soho. The replacement of sex shops and peep show parlours by wine bars and brasseries allowed them to believe that they were eradicating the prostitutes and the punters.

And there is nothing a liberal likes more, he continued, than 'to try to wish something away, to pretend it doesn't exist just because it's been removed from eye-level'.

Yet in reducing Soho to a thin shadow of its former self, nothing had been done to alter the darker course of human sexuality. 'These trendy types', he gestured grandly towards the throng of drinkers around us, were precisely the people who refused to stare into the unknown blackness of their own desire, preferring instead to draw fuzzed-over links between pornography and rape, prostitution and exploitation.

By now I wanted to ask him about the disguise he himself used as a respectable executive. Did he not adhere even more closely to 'fuzzed-over' concepts of bourgeois deception? But I knew enough of Alistair to realize that this sort of monologue was his only real way of conversing and so I left him to it, hoping for a time later that night, at the formal 'interview' he stressed we would conduct at his men's club in Pall Mall, when he would actually answer a question. But we still had some way to go before then.

Leaving his liberal favourites to 'their Canadian lagers and Nicaraguan coffees', we walked back down Old Compton Street until we hit the Charing Cross Road. A block beyond this, we strolled past the first series of windows lit by the age-old sign of a bleak red light. There were two here, illuminating the second and third floor windows of an old red-brick building. The doorway, right next to the Man Fu Kung Chinese takeaway with its 'cheapest food in London' boast, was always open between noon and midnight. There, the message of the red light was fleshed-out by frayed scraps of paper Sellotaped to the thin passage walls. Alistair pointed these out with particular relish; he loved their shambling attempts at colourful creativity.

You could find them down selected streets in Soho. Bright crayons decorated their otherwise grubby pages. All of them feature the word 'model', Soho's traditional euphemism for a prostitute. Words like 'new', 'teenage', 'exotic', 'leggy',

'friendly', 'bouncy', 'busty' and 'dusky' featured prominently and were coloured in painstakingly. The more innovative were sketched out on blue or yellow pieces of cardboard, their model messages being framed by pretty patterns of hand-drawn flowers or shaky artistic impressions of the young beauties waiting upstairs. Alistair literally chortled at the thought of these colouring-book type ads being designed by the ageing maids who let in the clients, kept the money safe and cooked at least one balanced meat-and-two-veg meal a day for their working girls.

At times it sounded as if he knew the name of every model and maid filling Soho's remaining buildings of prostitution. Alistair denied this, pointing out that the turnover of women was so rapid that he did not have the time to keep up to date with the occupiers of every building. He had, however, paid for sex in most of them and he still tried to spend an evening every month going from one to another, across the breadth of Soho, to ensure that few newcomers were left unseen by him.

He had not visited this Charing Cross building for some months, so up the narrow staircase we climbed to, first, the top floor and, then, back down to the middle flat. Both flats were smaller than an average household front room and they were divided into two by a thin partition wall. In each, the space where the prostitute worked was so cramped that, apart from a single-bed, there was barely enough room for two people. Both prostitutes were waiting for their next client – a sure sign on an otherwise busy Friday night, intimated Alistair, that this particular house had hit a slump.

The two women – 'Sarah', a 'new English Rose', and 'Maxine', a 'friendly model' – both knew Alistair, although they referred to him as 'Robert'. He soon let them know that ours were courtesy, rather than business, visits undertaken for my 'book research'. 'Maxine' feigned a polite interest but made it plain that, this being a lean time of the night for her, she would prefer to finish the remains of her bread and butter pudding instead of chattering away

to us. 'Sarah', however, appeared genuinely interested and said that she had once dreamt of being a writer, some time before she met a man called 'Gordy' who first introduced her to prostitution. She spoke a little about the writers she liked most, an unlikely combination of Ed McBain and Jilly Cooper.

I found it difficult to look straight into her face for her red-rimmed eyes were sunken into black rings of exhaustion, or what I thought might also be despair. Alistair chipped in anyway, saying that we couldn't linger but had to get back on the streets because it was near ten-thirty and, this being London, we only had a few hours left before Soho began to shut down for the night. The door had hardly closed behind us when Alistair launched into his typically flagrant prediction that 'Sarah' would struggle to keep her room going if she couldn't 'pull herself together'. 'Maxine', in his opinion, was little better. But later that night, he promised, he would show me a more inventive side to prostitution in Soho.

Not unexpectedly, Alistair suggested that we have another drink at The Cambridge pub, on the curved corner of Charing Cross Road and Moor Street. I was still sufficiently sober to realize that if I had one more quick triple Scotch I would be well on my way to indisputable drunkenness. Alistair, oblivious to the idea of refusal, had soon shouldered his way back from the bursting bar to the street outside where I stood next to a group of riotous young professionals who all looked like they had enjoyed a successful money-making week in computing or share-dealing. Alistair was more at ease here, alongside the packs of drinkers breathing in the passing car-exhaust fumes while they lined this dirty street corner. Although he looked more frayed than he had done in Wheelers, he still stood apart from this younger crowd of city workers. Even against such a squalid backdrop he exuded the authoritative arrogance and self-absorption that prolific financial success often evokes. He was momentarily lost in his own world and, as

he stared silently at some point in the distance, I had my chance to stay a step or two behind him. I took most of the triple scotch into my mouth and made the short walk to the pub toilet where I deposited it down the nearest grimy sink.

This was not a night to be sentimental about wasting good drink for I knew that to lose control with Alistair would be to hit a deadly artery of danger. Once my own senses began to slip towards a filmy haziness I knew he would ram home his advantage mercilessly. He would use drink to screen the otherwise visible darkness seeping through his Soho dream. If reality became blurred by the more desolate textures of imagination, Alistair would be less a besuited banking executive than the black-hooded man arcing that 'big brute' of a studded belt.

I rejoined him outside with a burning mouth but a clearer head. He had decided on the itinerary for the rest of the night. We would take in a peep-show and then set up an appointment to see a prostitute in the early hours of the morning, after we had conducted our promised 'chat' at his club. He drank what remained of his own Scotch and then, wordlessly, led the way round the corner.

Moor Street is one of the shortest in Soho, more a bricked walkway than an actual road, but it has a full increment of sex establishments. Apart from the Adult Entertainment And Live Show Centre and its accompanying video and book shop, three passages were filled with the now familiar model adverts. At the door to the Centre we were greeted cheerfully by a young woman sporting a Sisters Of Mercy goth-rock wig and a bright red leather mini-dress. Her face was whitened with foundation and her lips and eyes were shaded with a violet tint accentuating the skin-jutting prominence of her cheekbones. She raised a lazy arc of a smile our way and enquired whether we'd like to step inside for a real treat of a live show.

Alistair sauntered into the glaringly white foyer. The Goth-girl, who couldn't have been long out of her teens, was sitting on a high stool. Her black-stockinged legs swung

casually back and forth, with her Doc Martens making a quiet dragging sound against the brown carpet every other swing. She smiled again when Alistair removed a £10 note from his wallet.

'Two for the live show, sir?' the girl asked demurely. She raised a pencil-thin eyebrow when Alistair shook his head and asked for change in single pound coins. Earlier, during his initial tirade against the dilution of Soho's 'traditional sexual character', he had lamented the erosion of the 'live show' in London as a prime example of censorship getting it wrong yet again.

In the early 1980s six Soho venues had offered a variety of live sex shows, at reasonable prices, to a select market of people. These exhibitions usually featured five or six naked men and women acting out the barest bones of a plot before they ended up on a grubby stage floor in diverse positions of copulation. Alistair realized that these Soho shows could never match the more gymnastically imaginative versions seen in Amsterdam, Berlin and Paris but he liked their distinctly London flavour. Moreover, they had been good for the balance of trade for they were extremely popular with Japanese businessmen.

With the government clampdown on Soho between 1983 and 1984, the authentic sex show had been banished and replaced by a series of cheap fakes. Although the signs on the windows outside were still the same, pledging fantastically steamy 'live bed-show action', the interior reality was radically different. Instead of the promised show, deluded customers were presented with a mockery where tame simulation was shrouded in an atmosphere thick with menace. Although only a few pounds were required to gain access to the showroom, visitors were then expected to buy a drink not only for themselves but for one of the 'hostesses'. This would incur a bill of between £80 and £100 and if the client refused to pay the money he would be threatened by a couple of thick set bouncers. Alistair railed against the logic which shut down Soho's past centres of sexual

entertainment and replaced them with these exploitative establishments run by 'a squalid ring of Cockney thugs'.

Yet he still felt a distinct weakness for peep-shows. Even though he realized that each pound coin he spent went straight into the pockets of these entrepreneurs he continued to frequent their peep-show booths. The violet-tinted girl counted out the ten coins methodically and lined them up in two vertical rows of five. Alistair slid the first from her desk and handed it to me. Pocketing his own five coins he scoffed at my mortified protestations that none of this was really necessary, that I would wait for him outside, that I had no wish to use his pounds to attend a peep-show. The girl let slip a low laugh for we were plainly an odd pair. Alistair made a jibe about me 'going all liberal' on him and guided me firmly towards the first booth where he shut the door behind me. I heard him slip into the stall next to mine.

A fat man would have seen the booth as a hell-hole. It was probably no more than three feet long, a foot wide and five feet high. So, boxed-in, I struggled to find one of Alistair's five coins. It was murky and stinking and the coins remained elusively lost in the lining of my trouser pocket. After a minute of futile scrambling I backed out of the booth and, straightening myself out, glared accusingly at the podgy bodyguard seated behind a glass-caged counter at the other end of the parlour from the smiley Gothic Brontë sister. The fat man's eyes stayed glued to his tabloid for he knew that if *he* tried to enter one of the five peeping booths he would find himself interminably jammed between the four narrow walls.

A coin popped up immediately and, with a deep breath, I returned to my booth. It was like being lowered back into one of those hot-boxes Alec Guinness whistlingly endured in *Bridge Over The River Kwai*. Alistair told me that the peep-show business had sadly dwindled to the point of primarily catering for the nervous Japanese businessmen who had yet to learn of the Soho bed-show scam. No doubt the size of each minuscule, uncomfortable booth was some

contemporary smart-alec's way of 'paying back the Japs' for past war-crimes against the Empire.

I pushed my coin glumly into its groove and, like technology at its slickest, the light at the back of my peeping mechanism went out. By dropping my head down sharply and lifting my eyes as high they would rise, as though I was rolling them back for the benefit of a tiny torch-shining optician, I had a perfect view of the bed-show.

A tall girl, wearing nothing but black stockings and a suspender belt, stood unsteadily on a double-bed. She attempted a sensual dance of some sort in time to Chic's late-1970s *Good Times* disco-smash. Occasionally she would smooth her hands tiredly over her body but, more often, she used them to flick the blonde ringlets of hair from her eyes. Few people can ever have seen a girl more bored than this. And, in its way, this terminal tedium exuded a disturbingly hypnotic fascination for the first forty-five seconds of money.

But at that point the window was once more filled with stark white light. I slipped another coin into the slot. The girl slid back into view. It appeared that she had lifted herself from her trance-like reverie and noticed both Alistair and I peering up at her. She climbed off the bed and began to walk across the bare wooden floorboards directly in front of our window-slits. Like the archetype of a cat in a glassed cage she paced briskly up and down, even though at every fourth or fifth pace she had to swing around to avoid hitting one of the walls. Homing in on Alistair as her more likely benefactor she eventually came to rest in front of his booth and lent back to remove a ribbed vibrator from beneath the bed. After a few seconds of watching her fondle the dildo I made my exit when the light flooded back into the booth.

I stood inside the foyer while the goth-girl whistled coyly at a handful of men peering into the centre as they drifted by. She shrugged amiably a few times, as if in emphasis of the fact that it was no skin off her nose whether or not her banter enticed a few more punters. Eventually a middle-aged

man wearing a polka dot tie and a striped short-sleeve shirt ducked in and made for the booth I had just vacated. The girl rolled her eyes in mock outrage at the man's sartorial style before settling on a witty variation of the 'phew, what a scorcher!' theme that echoed around Soho as the temperature continued to rise even though we were already deep into the night.

Five minutes later, Alistair emerged from his booth looking flushed around the jowls. When I handed over his remaining three coins he asked brusquely if I planned to loosen up at any point in the evening. This tickled the Doc Martened girl's overworked sense of sarcasm and she emitted a series of staccato sniggers and asked whether I was Alistair's son. As it was difficult to guess who was more offended by the idea, Alistair and I left in silence with the girl's request that we come back soon gurgling in our ears.

We were aiming for 'Josie', near the middle of the street, on the left-hand side, on the last stop of our tour before we would sit down and begin, hopefully, to talk to each other. It was a more upmarket building than that around the Charing Cross corner. The door was painted a rich, olive green and the stairway was both wider and cleaner than usual in Soho. Written in gold against a black backdrop, 'Josie's' card proclaimed her to be an 'Interesting And Versatile Model'. The first floor of the building housed a film and video production company and it was only on the second flight of stairs that the adverts began to feature heavily underlined 'DB' initials. As if he could read my unspoken query Alistair said, 'Dominant Bitch,' when he rang the bell to her room.

After a short delay the door swung open to reveal a short, grey-haired Italian woman in her late-fifties. Her hair was screwed back in a bun and she wore a blue apron over her grey dress. She greeted Alistair effusively with a kiss on both cheeks. He wrinkled his nose in reply. The tang of cooked onion drifted from her hands and through the flat. It appeared to be wafting in accompaniment with the strains

of Cole Porter lilting on her portable cassette desk. *Night And Day* was playing, as if in suggestion that this covered the expanse of time when the maid was frying and boiling and stewing her onions.

Alistair drew her into the adjoining tiny kitchen where, presumably, the smell was at its most pungent. They whispered together for a few minutes before she let loose a chuckle and said, 'Of course, Roberto, for you, of course!' A minute later she left Alistair in the kitchen and motioned me to follow her. Alistair, still smarting from our minor brush at the peep-show, refused to meet my eye. I walked across the room and through two doorways leading to a chamber encased in leather. In the middle there was an impressive, black wood frame and a shining metal pulley similar to Mandy's engineered version. The walls were covered by the then familiar hoods and uniforms, whips and belts, manacles and ropes. She motioned me to sit down on a long couch and intimated that they would be back for me.

After ten minutes, more than time enough for me to make myself acquainted with the variety of contraptions on display, I heard Alistair and a younger woman laughing loudly together. Through their laughter, the Cole Porter songs rolled on. Eventually there was a quiet knock on my door and the maid said that 'Roberto' was ready for me. Alistair was on the first-floor landing, jangling some loose coins in the pocket of his elegantly light Paul Smith suit. The onion scent slipped down the stairs and it was only when we were back in Moor Street that it finally faded.

In a trice Alistair had hailed a taxi where, in the back, he confirmed that we were at last on the way to our interview rendezvous. But, more significantly, he said, 'Josie' was expecting us back in Moor Street in three hours, at 2.30 a.m. when, with her doors shut to ordinary trade, we would round off the evening in 'outrageous style'. Thinking of those manacles and whips I felt the sweat congeal coldly on the back of the cab's leather seat as we moved through Piccadilly and then into the stretch of Pall Mall where Alistair's

gentlemen's club was located in its hundred-and-fifty-year-old splendour.

In the long, book-lined portals of the club's 'smoking chamber', and directly beneath an imposing portrait of a former Tory Prime Minister, Alistair spoke for nearly three hours. We had the space to ourselves, with only a blue-coated barman for company whenever Alistair rang the small bell resting on the mahogany reading table. The surrounding stillness seemed to encourage his unbroken flow of words.

Initially, he had eyed the tape-recorder with considerable suspicion. I decided not to tell him about the innovative interview security system devised by Docherty's clients, Arlene and Rachel. Yet he soon appeared oblivious to the recorder's whirring, barely noticing when tapes clicked to completion and had to be turned over or replaced. He would only stop if forcibly interrupted by a question or by his own request for more Scotch and cigars; otherwise Alistair liked to talk in huge slabs of speech as if he needed to clear something acrid from his chest.

'You must realize,' he began, 'that we're dealing with a subject which is distorted by secrecy. This isn't my choice. I always think that things should be brought out into the open. That's my way. And, on paper, it's the way of capitalism, the way of a free-market economy, the way of democracy, the way of a free press, the way of the Western world.

'But, you see, we have a problem. And that problem is truth. It's a simple but much-abused word, truth. If we could live according to truth then we would obviously have discovered some form of paradise. But before we can get to truth we have to get past fear. And the fear that most people suffer from is the fear that the truth about themselves will be uncovered. One of the most basic truths is that almost everyone, without exception, lies. We lie out of fear, fear of being judged for the truth of what or who we are.

'And for better or worse we live in a society – and it *is* the best type of society existing today – where fundamental truths are often replaced by what I call "convenient" truths. Let me give you some clearer examples here. It's a fundamental truth that since time became history there has been prostitution. It's a fundamental truth that there will always be women who will sell their bodies in exchange for something they want. It's fundamental truth that men, most men, are sometimes in need of this kind of sex. It's a fundamental truth that even if there was no poverty, even if there was excellent education right across the world, there would still be prostitution. One need only look at Mandy Kavanagh – a beautiful, rich, eloquent, indeed brilliant woman – to realize this. It's a fundamental truth that we all have a "dark" side to our sexuality. I know this to be true, you know this to be true . . .'

Alistair allowed me to ponder my own sexual darkness as he peeled the cellophane wrapping from a new cigar. While it was true that my 'anthropological' interest in his consumption of prostitution was bound up in a darker kind of voyeurism, it took me a little longer to recognize that the effectiveness of his language enabled him to blur the difference between truth and assumption. Rather than stripping away everything obscuring the core of truth, Alistair's words only seemed to deepen the mystery of prostitution. His assertion of prostitution's inexorable inevitability was meant to be so persuasive that it would be reduced to a banal mystery – like the fact that, every day, the sun rises and sets across earth. In his terms all women were, instinctively, prostitutes and all men helplessly prone to uncontrollable sexual cravings.

More interesting than this, Alistair's authoritative vignette rang with the supposed resonance of the definitive expert. While we had trawled across Soho I kept thinking of him as a connoisseur. Whenever he bemoaned the fact that his space of specialist consumption had been eroded, ironically enough by the rise of his otherwise beloved Margaret

Thatcher's rampant free market economics, he was staking his claim as a connoisseur. It was this 'expert' knowledge of Soho's original and apparently more authentic past which made Alistair stand out from the 'lazily flippant' Friday night crowd. Is this how he saw himself, I asked, as 'a connoisseur'?

'A "connoisseur"? Well, well, well! *That's* an interesting word, my friend,' Alistair chortled as he puffed on his newly-lit cigar. 'Mmmmm, "connoisseur"? Yes, I like it. I like it a lot! Of course I am a connoisseur. I'm a connoisseur of truth . . .'

Before he could move back onto his track of truth I interrupted. 'I meant "connoisseur" in less abstract terms. I was thinking more of you as a connoisseur of pornography and prostitution.'

'Mmmmm, those are your words but hell . . .' he said as he swivelled his chair round to make sure that we were alone, '. . . I'm not going to argue with you there. But tell me, son, why did you use that word in particular?'

Unsettled by this 'son' interjection, which would surely have got the Goth-girl from the Adult Entertainment Centre rocking in delight on her stool, I cautiously replied, 'You seem to think of yourself as an expert on Soho. You gave me a guided tour of the area and compared it with your more historical knowledge of the Soho that's virtually disappeared. I thought that was interesting, but . . .'

'Forget the "buts!" Frankly, I'm flattered, old boy! Glad to be of service!'

'But I found it strange that you even agreed to be seen in public, in the places we visited, with me.'

'I've already told you. I'll crush you if you cross me,' he said evenly.

Trying to stay calm beneath both the fire of Scotch burning through me and the icy chill of his stare, I said, 'It made me wonder if, rather than trying to shock me, you were wanting to make prostitution and pornography appear more respectable. It was like the consciousness of the

historian brushing up against the leer of the pornographer – if you don't mind me saying . . .' I trailed off tamely into silence.

'How so?' said Alistair, his Arctic glare remaining intact.

'When you talk about pornography – whether it's about Thai lesbian mags or German bondage films or Dutch pictures of disabled women – you give it a gloss. You move it away from the traditional moral arena where people debate its harmful effects. You move into a more aesthetic arena . . .'

'Exactly! Because it is about aesthetics! It all comes down to taste in the end. Maybe this is not to some people's public taste but it is *my* taste and I resent having my arena invaded. These are specialist, informed tastes. They might try to ban it but they cannot stop it. It's a negation of freedom. This is one mistake the British are making. And, as a very proud Britisher, I am at liberty to say this. They are trying to sweep the truth under the carpet. But it will not stay there, it rises to the surface . . .'

'Yet in a way,' I asked as I tried to keep my increasingly drink-fuddled head clear, 'aren't you doing exactly the same thing? Rather than confronting any moral truth about exploitative pornography you're pushing it under the smooth surface of your connoisseurship? Doesn't your concept of truth get lost in all these "freedoms" of taste?'

'No, no, my friend, you're stepping into murky waters there. Freedom is truth! I think you're thinking more of our "Terminator Angel" here. She's the one who is looking to obscure the truth of who she is behind all these false devices of tastefulness and control. She comes across all high and mighty, holier than thou. Yet what is she? She's *a mere prostitute*, a *whore*!'

'She never seems to deny the fact of her prostitution.'

'Oh she's much too smart for *that*! No, no, no, my friend, what she prefers to do is to try and obscure the truth in a more complicated way. All this talk of five-year experiments! I mean it's pathetic. She'll never stop. She's

always been a prostitute, she always will be. I find her pretensions quite insufferable at times!'

'Why do you see her every Tuesday then?'

'Well, that's an interesting question. It's *the* important question! On the surface you might say it's because, in terms of pure looks and figure, she is devastating! That's certainly what drew me towards her. I also admired her at first because she had the courage to come out as a prostitute. But then I began to see that she thought she was pulling off a much more magnificent conceit. She's trying to turn the meaning of the word "prostitute" inside out. She's trying to control her life to such a degree of perfection that she finds some strange source of power in being a prostitute. It's quite ridiculous! She thinks she's stronger than me – and this is why she is so fascinating, if insufferable. I don't know any other woman who would take the liberties she does with me . . .'

'Well you do seem to pay her an awful lot of money to take severe "liberties" with you . . .'

'I'm not talking about *that*! That is a private affair between me and her! What has she been saying about me?'

'It's not what she's said about you. It's just that I know the type of work she sometimes does . . .' I answered vaguely.

'This is typical of her! She always tries to cut me down. What happens on a Tuesday afternoon is my "experiment", if you like . . .'

'What sort of experiment? To be dominated without receiving any kind of sexual relief?'

'Never you mind. All that is important is that I'm wise to her. She wants to outwit me, to stand up to me, to prove herself the stronger. She is not – I'm merely toying with her. Everything will crumble when her five-year date passes and she comes crawling back to me. Then the whip will be in the other hand . . .'

'What do you mean by that? That you'll be the one doing the beating?'

'My, my, all this drinking obviously doesn't agree with you. It's making you very inquisitive. I'm not sure if I approve of that . . .'

'Was it a difficult decision to agree to meet me?'

'Not at all. You know the score.'

'But aren't you bothered by the risk you take in visiting these Soho prostitutes? Couldn't a man in your position be easily identified? Isn't it safer to stick to a more discreet prostitute like Mandy?'

'The thing with Mandy is that she's terribly austere. In a way she is the one who has driven me to look elsewhere. Trying to get into her heart is like trying to chip away at an iceberg. Sometimes I prefer to have some brash, raw, sluttish sex instead . . .'

'And that's when you go down to Soho?'

'Precisely.'

'Do you worry that this secret might be discovered?'

'Is this a threat?'

'Not at all.'

'Because if it is, my friend . . .'

'I know, you've told me.'

'Do *not*, on any account, forget it.'

'So,' I persevered, 'do you worry about someone spotting you coming out of a Soho room?'

'Look, I'm a realist, a pragmatist. I know that I am, despite my considerable success, not indispensable in the world of business. I had to fight damned hard to get where I am today. And yet there are always competitors waiting to take your place should you slip a little. It's jungle-law. I accept that. I came up this route and if someone can outwit me then they jump above me. That's why capitalism works because, generally, the strong rise to the top and they have the strength to drag the rest of society along with them. So I accept these laws. I am precise in my efforts to ensure that no rope is given to those who would wish to hang me. While I'll follow the true course of my sexuality, at the same time I'll choke off any threat to my career. I'm not going to lose

everything because of some sex scandal. You see, my public profile is very low-key. If it was what I wanted I could have found myself regularly on television or in the newspapers' society pages. But I'm not in this for fame. I don't need to be known to feel strong. I'm strong anyway. I know this. So I can move wherever I like, whether it's in the homes of the Mandys of this world or in the rooms of Soho. Mandy Kavanagh is the only one who really knows who I am but, then, I also know her. I know how she works, how her mind operates. She is far too proud to reveal me as I am to some scurrilous hack. She wants to beat me on my own terms . . .'

'Is that why you sometimes feel such rage towards her – because she knows you like no-one else does? She knows you better than your own wife does . . .'

'Well she is much more interesting, not to mention younger and better-looking, than my wife . . .'

'And doesn't that affect your marriage?'

'What do you mean?'

'The fact that you're more interested in your struggle for power with a prostitute than in your own wife?'

'On the contrary – it maintains the equilibrium of my marriage. And you might not believe it but a loyal, middle-aged wife is a considerable asset at certain business functions.'

'Mandy seems to think that you're consumed with guilt.'

'Does she now? That's interesting.'

'Are you guilty about the way you treat your wife?'

'And how would you know how I treat my wife?'

'Well, I do know about your Tuesday afternoon sessions. Isn't there perhaps some shame and guilt in your need to be punished by "The Terminator Angel"?'

Alistair quietly considered the wrapping on a new cigar. I wondered if he was capable of murder, such was the depth of venom he struggled to contain. After a minute of silence, during which time his face flipped through a variety of strangulated expressions, he finally swallowed phlegm from the back of the throat. 'Perhaps . . .' he at last said in a

strange voice, 'perhaps she is right. I feel many different emotions with her. Lust, anger . . . shame, grief, relief.'

'Why relief?'

'Because I don't have to lie with her. I am what I am when I'm in that cellar. As she is too – "The Terminator Angel". She is what all women would like to be . . .'

'I don't know too many women who aspire to be prostitutes . . .' I said slowly.

'You know well what I mean. She is strong. She is formidable.'

The impact of these sudden confessions appeared to have exhausted Alistair. He sank back into his chair, looking confused and tormented. We sat there silently for many minutes before he finally asked, wearily I thought, 'Should we adjourn to Moor Street? To "Josie" – she is much lighter of heart than "The Terminator Angel" . . .'

'No, I think I'd better get going . . .'

'Why? It's not even two yet!'

'It's best if I leave now.'

'Yes, you're probably right. You've probably got to check in with "The Terminator".'

'No, I just need to get home.'

'Before you go, there's just one thing . . .' he said with a determined show of renewed vigour, '. . . when you do see our friend Amanda again, you might tell her that she's now got a rival for my affections . . .'

I kept silent, until he had to prompt me with a 'Don't you want to know who it is?' For a scarifying moment I wondered if he was playing some kind of trick on me for, confused by his brazen insistence on our tour through Soho, I had struggled to identify his motivation. Was he actually yearning to have his 'personal' truth uncovered? Or did he find a mysterious sexual thrill in having another man 'bear witness' to him as a connoisseur? Alistair, however, had 'prettier prey' in mind.

'She's a strange young thing. A dirty-faced little pixie. Name of "Jackie". I found her in Lisle Street a while ago.

In a place with green walls. I gave her a terrible thrashing. I beat her 'til the screaming dried up from her. I enjoyed the change. It gave me more feelings of release than Mandy Kavanagh ever gave to me. I'm going to go back there, down to Chinatown next week, and I'm going to colour in the face of that dirty little pixie. You tell "The Terminator Angel" that, you tell her that I am about to wreak my revenge. And then I'm coming for her. But in between those two lovelies I can tell that I'm going to have to gun for you. I know now this whole evening has been a terrible waste, a tragic mistake. I'm going to break you, my friend. You just wait, I'm going to break you . . .'

The fury breaking up Alistair's voice into a series of hoarse, savage cries forced him out of his chair and he lunged towards me, trying to scoop up the tape recorder in the process. He swore and stumbled drunkenly, cracking his leg against the table with a sickening thud. He crashed to the floor in agony, his melodramatic screams echoing through the club. With visions of him laying an assault charge against me, I decided to make my move. I gathered up the tapes and the recorder which Alistair had knocked to the floor. His 'Fuck you, I'm going to break you, break you' mantra resumed in full throaty swing as he clutched his leg on the thickly carpeted floor. I turned away from him and ran down the long passage and out into the night where the air still felt thick and clammy.

Chapter Seven

Chinatown Whore and the Dream of Casablanca

Alistair's words ran through my head for the rest of that night and most of the next day. Again and again his grisliest images slipped down the cavernous sides of my hangover.

Mandy called me in the middle of that hazed-over day to find out if I had 'survived' the previous night. My description of our ranging through Soho kept returning to the set of words which had slid from his mouth near the end of the night. They were heard just before the last tape hissed to a stop; and because I could not recreate the chill I had felt when he spoke those words, I spun the cassette back a few reels. Alistair's voice flooded from the small speaker and along the telephone line to where Mandy listened in troubled silence. I clicked the tape off after less than a minute, for that was all the time one needed to imagine the worst for his 'dirty-faced little pixie', his £15 Chinatown whore, the girl he called 'Jackie'.

Mandy had not known that the inverse of Alistair's masochism already entailed something more tangible than mere fantasies of degradation. She had not known that when he visited prostitutes other than her he played a part much closer to his own heart; a part where he was the one wielding the belt with an intent at which we could only fearfully guess. We made mutually disturbed and supportive noises but, essentially, there was little comfort to be found. The further we peeled away the layers of Alistair's professional self, the darker he seemed to grow.

Yet even as we said we would both be more careful I knew that Mandy would see Alistair again that following Tuesday; and that later that night I would be back in Soho, on its fringes, around the crowded restaurants and shops of Chinatown. There, somewhere, in a small room at the top of a green-walled staircase, Jackie worked.

I knew too that as Mandy's days as a prostitute moved ever closer to their five-year culmination she would endure those Tuesday afternoons – no matter how dizzying it became to look down into their depths. At the very least this would be an internal act of solidarity with those prostitutes, suddenly given shape by the image and name of Jackie, working in more dangerous worlds than her own.

My own reasons for returning to Soho that night were more ambiguous. I felt something like despair in the dry, metallic taste in my mouth whenever I thought of this faceless prostitute left to Alistair's remote mercy. Perhaps a bad headache pumped additional swirls of melodrama into my mood but, then, it appeared as if I had no choice but to warn this girl, to tell her what Mandy and I already knew of Alistair, who paid money to beat her. With less nobility, I knew as well that I wanted to see her face so that her image would become less drunkenly enshrined with sweeping suffering. Maybe if I could just see what she looked like I would be able to think of her less.

The sky above Chinatown turned a glorious purple as the last of the day's light drifted away. It was nine o' clock and a pale moon slivered across the top right hand corner of this thick mauve canvas – the colour briefly reminding me of one of Kyle Johannsen's better post-pepperoni pizza paintings. I passed the first of the scrawled, hand-written 'Busty Model' adverts pinned to the side of a narrow doorway. The night when I had sat in Simone's front room, lined with paintings and Gourmet Salmon-fed cats as Kyle warbled on about Jackson Pollock, seemed a long time ago. I was on my way down into a different, more desperate

world of prostitution with Alistair as my dreaded linkman.

The streets thronged with an early Saturday night crowd. An American family still talking about the performance of *Les Miserables* they had just seen jostled with hand-holding couples on their way to a West End movie and with a bigger group of twenty-year-olds apparently aiming for The Spice Of Life pub in Cambridge Circus. Chinatown, for all of them, was a vibrant place to pass through. This view shone, too, from the faces glowing inside the stream of Chinese restaurants. Outside each of these restaurants, bordering both sides of the street, still more couples peered intently at the old rain and grease-splattered menus. 'Yes, look,' I heard one woman say, 'they have Singapore noodles *and* prawn crackers,' as if this should be a surprise in Chinatown.

Only the Chinese themselves appeared less self-consciously aware that it was a fun Saturday night out. Behind the steaming bowls of food they carried from table to table, waiters bawled tetchily at each other. Meanwhile, inside the almost exclusively Chinese-patronised grocery stores and Cantonese book shops business clicked over with a similarly brisk rhythm.

I caught sight of a red light glowing softly in a third-floor window a block away. A bare light bulb hung from the top corner of the lace-covered window. There were no Chinese lanterns swinging gently in the breeze, no wafting images of exotic romance to divert attention from the fact that this was a '£15-a-go whore' room. I wondered if this was where I would find Jackie.

But there were at least six separate lights, and therefore rooms, at this end of Lisle Street. I crossed over to inspect the modelling adverts at the bottom of each grim stairway, trying as hard as I could to look like a diligent writer in search of truth rather than the hard-up letch I more probably appeared to the passing parade of respectable lovers.

There was none of the glamorous *frisson* of words like 'Terminator Angel' or *La Chienne de Souffrance* in these home-made adverts. Rather, they searched for an earthier

inspiration. If Mandy and Simone, with their psychological domination of masochistic clients, were the seriously classical actresses of prostitution, these coyly-named Soho 'models' belonged to the seamier skin and splatter side of the sex market. Only 'Kiki Experienced French Model, 2nd Floor' passed herself off as a mildly different kind of prostitute. Her advert had been carved into a thick piece of slate which had then been screwed into the wall. She had obviously been there for some time; the 'experienced' adjective being another coded hint that she was perhaps an old prostitute. Alistair, I thought, would have zipped by her plaque with a derisive sneer. Despite his own age and looks, he 'liked them young and pretty'.

At the third and last doorway I finally saw the advert I was searching for. There were more adjectives on this thin blue sheet of paper than in any other along the street. 'New, busty, leggy, pretty young model – 3rd Floor'. The walls were also painted green. This was the place. I walked slowly up the winding stairs noticing the stern warnings not to give money to anyone until inside either the second or third floor rooms. How many nervous men had been ripped off in the past by a stray hustler demanding bogus entry money at every landing? And then, in turn, how many prostitutes had suffered the ensuing kickback – violently rather than just financially?

Seeing these notes and smelling the piss clinging to the frayed carpet was like having one's face pressed into the rank hypocrisy of British law on prostitution. In another classic piece of legislative fudging these Chinatown and Soho 'houses' are effectively allowed to operate as one-woman fucking rooms with the police looking the other way, as long as the adverts maintain their 'modelling' euphemisms and the rent is paid on time to eager landlords. There is no wonder that someone like Alistair can methodically club a helpless prostitute in a place such as this where safety and hygiene are only cursorily considered. If the 'model' signs were torn down and replaced by a properly run brothel,

owned and organised by the prostitutes themselves, the environment would be different. There are, after all, brothels in some parts of Holland and America where women do not automatically feel like cheap slabs of meat nor their clients like furtive miscreants. Yet that would mean a public denunciation of hypocrisy in favour of decriminalised prostitution and that's not the way things are going in this country; and so those other low and dirty feelings clung to the core of this dump, oozing out from its green Chinatown walls.

With some relief I found the stairwell to be empty as I continued my climb. The adverts for both second and third floor models were even looking sweeter up every flight. The one I aimed for had little rings of flowers drawn along the edges. Outside one of the two second floor doors I heard muffled voices. 'Beautiful Leggy Alex' was obviously entertaining a gentleman caller.

Eventually, I stood uncertainly on the cramped third floor where there were two adjoining doors. The adverts on the first finally gave name to the room's 'new and busty young model – pretty Jackie'. Above this door's small white bell there was another message – 'Please Ring'. Feeling abruptly foolish, I hovered around the landing. At last, sufficiently psyched up to talk to Alistair's 'dirty-faced little pixie', I rang the bell. After a long pause full of the sound of a television being turned down and the scraping of numerous chairs, the door opened a crack and a perspiring pug-faced woman, with a cigarette in one hand and her glasses lost in a stiffly permed bush of hair, peered round at me. 'Sorry love,' she said kindly, 'she's busy and there're two waiting.' I must have looked at her dully, attempting to absorb the fact that there were three men crammed into these tiny rooms, for she suggested, 'I'd come back in about half an hour if I was you, after ten, before the pubs shut – it's usually a little quieter round then.'

I nodded dumbly and stumbled down into the glistening street outside. I brushed past a group of sniggering teenage

girls who guessed where I had just been. They proceeded to describe each other in the advertising jargon of Chinatown prostitution. 'I just have to be called "versatile!" ' shouted the loudest girl to a chorus of uproarious laughter from the others. If Jackie was as young as Alistair intimated then she could hardly have been more than a few years older than any of these supposedly carefree girls, their thick lip-stick rimming the cigarettes they waved in the air.

I felt empty wandering down Old Compton Street. Memories of the night before made me turn sharply away into first Frith and then Greek Street. There were more adverts, ciphered in crayon, for models along these streets. They promised a similar type of prostitute to those working in the rooms of Chinatown and so, almost on a whim, I entered an open doorway where yellow and white cards were stuck against the walls.

The first two doors I knocked at were also 'busy'. Then in a building on Greek Street, on the first floor, I found myself being ushered in by a small, smiling Italian woman who must have been well past pensionable age. 'Come in, come in – you not wait long,' she assured me. I could smell cabbage cooking in the small kitchen where her portable black and white television set was tuned to ITV's Saturday night movie. Burt Reynolds, looking suave, was driving a fast car down a big wide road.

Veering me away from the kitchen, where I also noticed her knitting resting on a chair in front of the television, she showed me into another minute room. 'Wait here – she come soon,' she said, shutting the door behind me and no doubt feeling eager to return to her knitting and Burt. I looked around this room. There were tatty piles of old soft-porn magazines on the long table in front of me – *Penthouse '89 Xmas Issue, Mayfair Letters Of The Year 1987, New Directions, Knave* and a coffee-ringed copy of *Big And Bouncy*. There was a small bookcase across the room – some of the books weren't that bad. I spotted copies of Jane Austen and Graham Greene on the second

shelf. Greene, I thought, would have been pleased; Austen less so.

But I tried to focus on more pressing matters. I picked up a magazine and cocked an eyebrow at the dubious pleasures of the flesh offered by Beryl – one of the 'Readers' Wives Of The Month'. Beryl was defiantly blatant in the three snaps shot by 'husband, Ray, from Huddersfield'. Her legs were opened wide to reveal her naked glory while, in a more symbolic gesture, Beryl licked an unpeeled banana. Just as I was about to move onto a perusal of the pornographic parody exhibited by Helen, from Catford, I heard another set of doors opening and closing as a woman said, 'Take care, love.' A short while later the side door leading into my room opened.

A thin, tired-looking woman stuck her head round the door. 'Come through love,' she said with a wan smile. She must have been in her mid-thirties with her long black hair pulled back into a pony-tail. She was wearing a skimpy white bodysuit. 'What can I do for you, my love?' she asked gently as she buttoned down the suit at crotch level. 'They're awfully tricky buttons down there,' she laughed as my eyes inevitably flew down to her fingers. 'Button up, button down all day long – aaah, there we are!' she exclaimed as there was a sudden click. 'Right – sorry about that! Where were we?' I wasn't sure about anything any more except for the fact that, as the doorbell rang, this was probably not an appropriate moment to say that I was writing a book and on the scrounge for an interview.

Sensing my awkwardness she continued readily, 'I'll tell you some of my services first, should I?'I nodded as I heard the Italian maid opening the door to the next client. 'Well it's £15 for straight sex with a condom, £20 for French and sex and from £60 for any of my more specialist services,' she said, gesturing to the uniforms and canes hanging from the wall behind her. 'How much is it to stay a little longer – perhaps for half an hour to an hour?' I asked, gauging the possible price one might have to pay for a decent

interview. A little too hopefully, perhaps, with the idea that maybe I was going to be more of a big-spender than she was used to, she replied that it was '£50 for half an hour and £75 for an hour – as many times as you can manage in as many positions as you like, love. I'm really good!' It made me strangely sad to have to disappoint her and tell her that I did not have enough money with me to stay for an hour. With another client waiting she wasn't overly shattered by my leaving and suggested I have 'a bit of a look round and come back later – there're a couple of cash-points down the road'.

I saw that she called herself 'Emma' and wondered if she really was a Jane Austen fan in disguise. I climbed up the next flight of stairs to where 'Helga' was sure to keep me waiting. Yet, to my surprise, a well-built German girl opened the door – naked but for a small pair of bikini briefs. Apparently the maid had gone to get Chinese takeaways as a special Saturday night treat. This was 'Helga' herself welcoming me into her velvety boudoir. She was an unexpectedly attractive woman, in her late-twenties, and I listened a little more closely as she flipped through her range of prices. She was £5 more expensive than 'Emma' on every service.

Her friendliness appeared genuine and so, a little more confidently, I told her the truth about my visit. She seemed to believe me – 'I would very much like to read this book when it comes out!' she whispered huskily – but pointed out that this was neither the time nor place to talk. She recommended I leave my number so that she could contact me the following week. I did so, even though I knew she would not call. But as she waited for her maid to return, and for her next caller to arrive, she suggested I sit with her.

She told me she was planning to go back to her home town near Dusseldorf and that she was easing out of prostitution. She only worked two days a week now – on Saturdays and Sundays – and was planning to find work as a beautician once she returned to Germany. This kind of prostitution was

too hard on the body and she shuddered to remember the times when she worked for fifteen consecutive days – from noon to midnight in this box of a room. She was just working out how many hundreds of men she must have 'serviced' in a fifteen-day stretch when the maid turned the key in the adjoining lock. With her nose twitching in anticipation 'Helga', or 'Inge' as she told me to call her, slipped on a robe and showed me out with a smile and the promise that she'd be in touch soon.

By the time I was halfway back towards Lisle Street and she was deep in her bowl of chop-suey, I was sure that she had already crumpled and flipped my telephone number into the wastepaper basket brimming with semen-filled condoms and tissues from her initial ten-hour stretch of the day's work. I couldn't blame her. She had already shown me sufficient favour without any monetary reward and, as she stressed, this kind of prostitution was too hard for any 'model' to waste her time on anything but the back-aching work in hand.

This briefest of opening tours around the sex rooms of both Chinatown and Soho had driven home the point that prostitution in these confined quarters is defined most by the mundane opening and closing of doors. There were many more doors than rooms; and often those rooms were hardly larger than the doorways themselves. Space was at a premium and to separate the waiting men from each other, more doors had to be introduced. By shutting one door and opening another, the clients could be assured of anonymity as they moved alone from one room to another – for there were few men who would wish to be seen buying sex in these depressing places. Ultimately, the cost of all these doors fell on the prostitute. Her space was pinched back to the point where she worked in a quarter-sized room with barely enough space for a bed and a mirror. This was battery-hen type prostitution. I found myself hoping that 'Helga', or 'Inge', would escape from her Greek Street coop on schedule.

Business appeared to have slackened a little in Lisle Street for the maid let me in with a 'She'll only be about ten minutes, love' greeting. I was motioned to sit in a plastic bucket chair next to the front door. A curtain was drawn across the hallway. Apparently the budget didn't extend to real doors in this house; so curtains separated one client from another. After about five minutes of sitting in this gloomy passage there was a flurry of activity and I was moved into the next section. Things were considerably brighter here. Between two sets of curtains a table lamp shone down on the obligatory collection of skin-mags. These were a little more up to date than those in 'Emma's' lounge; but it was still a consolation after a couple of minutes when the routine resumed. Either business was exceedingly brisk or else clients were getting cold feet at the last moment.

Whatever, I had moved another notch up the clientele ladder. I had reached the kitchen at last. The maid and I exchanged pleasantries about the weather before the door to Jackie's room opened and a thin white hand stretched out, holding two £10 notes. As the door closed again the maid put one of the notes in a drawer and shoved the other down the front of her dress. Either she had one breast considerably larger than the other or else there were an awful lot of £10 notes stuffed in her brassiere. I wanted to ask if it wasn't both uncomfortable and unsafe to use your bra as a bank but she was deeply ensconced in the TV film's climactic car-chase. Burt Reynolds was still driving that car, although its one side had been badly dented by a huge container truck. His moustache, however, appeared unruffled by the chase. 'Oh, isn't Burt just a hunk of man?' she suddenly said. I mumbled in a non-committal way, before realizing that this had been a rhetorical question.

There were more magazines on the kitchen table and, figuring that the maid was too bound up in Burt to mind, I picked up one idly and coincidentally turned to another 'Readers' Wives' section. This particular page featured Meryl, shot in the buff by 'boyfriend Bill in Leeds'. It

seemed that the 'Readers' Wives' nude Polaroid slot was particularly popular in Yorkshire. Meanwhile, in these Chinatown rooms the obvious intention of displaying all these magazines was to coax the client to a pitch of such arousal that by the time he entered the prostitute's bedroom his own ejaculation would not be a long way off.

As I heard the door on the other side of Jackie's room open and close in quick succession I put Meryl and Bill to one side and took a deep breath. A minute later the door opened onto a dingy red room and the maid said, encouragingly I thought, 'Go on love – it's your turn at last!' Jackie was standing behind the door so it was only when I was actually inside the room that I saw her face to face.

In this box-room, against the red illuminations and folded-back mirrors, Jackie showed a kind of bruised beauty. I thought this not only because I knew what Alistair had done to her but because her very prettiness seemed to be mocked by the tiredness seeping through her lightly made-up face. There was a momentarily eerie sensation that I was looking at two faces simultaneously, with one struggling to rise up and destroy the other. The surface face belonged to a nineteen-year-old girl but then, looking deeper, I thought I could already see the face she would wear a few years from now when she would be old both inside and out. She tried to reach for a smile but it hardly even touched the corners of her mouth. Instead she just rested against the window-sill and said, softly, 'Hello.' I said 'Hello' back and we looked at each other for the most fleeting of moments.

She had big wide eyes and the spiky look of her blonde hair was accentuated by her studded bracelets and earrings. She wore a black bra, red panties and a matching polka dot suspender belt. On her right arm there was an elastoplast. She noticed me looking at the plaster and, then, she did smile.

'I'm not supposed to tell any of the punters but come have a look,' she said in a stagy whisper. 'I only had this done

a month ago.' Jackie motioned me over to the window where she drew the curtains back slightly. The yellow street light fell across the top part of her arm, making it look even paler. She pulled the elastoplast gently away from her skin.

'The maid says I have to keep it hidden. She says the punters don't like to know a girl here has a boyfriend.' Jackie pointed to the thin tattoo which had been covered by the plaster – 'I did this for *my* boyfriend, look.'

I looked. Two words were written in black and red ink – '*TYRONE FOREVER*'.

'What'cher think?' she asked.

'It looks pretty in this light. Did it hurt?'

' 'Course it fucking hurt! Love hurts, baby! You never had a tattoo then?'

'Not so far.'

'Naaah, I don't think you'll ever get one. Not the type.'

'Maybe not,' I admitted.

'You been here before?'

'No.'

'So what do you fancy? Sex for fifteen? With a rubber of course. Or what about some horny French and sex for twenty? I suck like a dream . . .'

It was disconcerting having to break into her sales pitch but I no longer knew what else to say than that I was writing this book. She looked at me silently as I told her that the night before Alistair had bragged to me about what he had done to her. I felt I had to tell her what he was like so that she steered clear of him when he returned.

It must have sounded wretched and laughable at the same time because she listened with a smile which then broke out into an infectious laugh. She came over to placate me, telling me that she was all right – that she knew the punter I was talking about and, yes, I was right, he was dangerous, but she'd never let him in again. Anyway, who did I think she was? Some stupid tart who didn't know how to deal with the crazies who came in and out of the door every ten minutes? She'd been in this game long enough now to look

after herself, boy. I was the crazy one but that was OK because it made her laugh and she'd had a crappy day and she was exhausted and in need of something to laugh about. But, more important than that, it made her think that someone out there had cared and, soppy as that was, it was still kinda nice in this fucked-up world.

Hearing this murmuring rush of words from her working girl and wondering why Jackie's hand hadn't stretched through the door yet, the maid knocked sharply on the wall. 'What's going on in there?' she asked caustically.

'It's all right, Molly – he's just deciding.'

As if organised by the maid herself, the front door bell rang. Jackie stood up from the window sill and, in a way she meant to be tender, put her hand on my face and said, 'Thank you – but look I've gotta get going.'

She moved languidly towards the mirror, looking over her shoulder at me. 'Do you want some French and sex before you go – I'll do it for fifteen, just for you. You'll like it . . .'

I asked her if we could meet some time instead, if she felt like talking to me about working here.

Jackie stood in front of the mirror playing with her hair, running her fingers through it with mock sensuality as she pursed and then licked her lips. It looked as if she had suddenly remembered it was Saturday night and she could imagine she was home somewhere a few years ago, sixteen again, and getting ready to go out on the back of her favourite boy's motorbike.

But she had been listening to me all the time. As she whirled away from the mirror she said, 'Sure, come by tomorrow – round eleven, just before I start working. We can go for a coffee or something. See you then, sweetheart!'

She pressed her eye to the door's peephole and turned back to me with a wink. 'All clear – bye for now – and thanks again, hey!'

As I made my way down the stairs she asked me my name. I told her and she replied, 'And mine *really* is Jackie!'

The next morning Jackie forgot our appointment – only arriving at work at ten past twelve. The maid had already sent me packing an hour earlier with a curt 'We only open at twelve on a Sunday, dear!' dismissal. I saw Jackie running up the stairs and just caught up with her on the first floor landing. She was out of breath and took a moment to recognize me. 'Oh Christ, I forgot – sorry, sweetheart – Tyrone had to kick me out of bed, I was so knackered after yesterday. Look, I'm late, but I'll meet you tomorrow – it's my day off – round one, outside the Hippodrome? OK? Gotta dash!' And off she raced up the second flight. I left with a slight shrug – not expecting her to be there the following day.

I arrived ten minutes late that Monday afternoon with my mind already made up that I'd only wait another twenty before moving on elsewhere. Yet Jackie was already there, looking at her watch, wearing a short, candy-striped summer dress and Roman sandals. Her hair was slicked back and held down by an Alice-band. She looked about fourteen.

My apologies for arriving late were accepted with a soft 'I didn't think you were coming then!' rebuke. Jackie looked uncertain when I asked her if she wanted to go somewhere for lunch. She said, after a long while, that even though she'd worked in Chinatown for two months she'd never eaten in a Chinese restaurant – 'Never – not in my *whole* life!'

It must have looked like I was taking my country cousin, rather than Chinatown's most adjectivally advertised prostitute, out for a day on the town as she studied each menu haphazardly before finally forcing me to choose a restaurant.

We sat in the furthest corner of one of the quieter Chinatown restaurants, for Jackie had said, 'I don't want nothing to do with opening and shutting doors on my day off!' She negotiated the menu successfully even though it took nearly twenty minutes to decide which dishes to choose.

Although she concentrated mostly on the new surroundings and her food, during the meal she told me that she had come down from Hull with Tyrone three months ago. She had grown up in Humberside and, after school and a deathly boring spell first as a packer in a fish factory and then as a check-out girl, she had eventually slipped into doing massage parlour work with an ex-hairdressing apprentice friend of hers. They found the work to be 'not much cop really. Ten quid to give some greasy guy the old how's your father hand-job!'

The friend soon moved down to London, not long after Jackie had 'discovered' Tyrone at the parlour's neighbourhood pub. It was the old 'lust at first sight' chestnut and, within a couple of days, Tyrone had moved in with Jackie. Before she knew it he had convinced her that the real money was to be made in London. She found her friend and they walked the beat together at King's Cross where she had once bumped into Docherty, 'that weird guy with the camera bag'. They moved on to Stamford Hill for a couple of weeks before Jackie was told about the opening at her current room in Chinatown. She was already sick of standing on corners in high heels and being forced to lift her skirt up while lying down in the folded-back front seats of motor cars – '*That's* the most degrading kind of paid fuck, looking up at the holes in some punter's upholstery.' The thought of walking the streets in winter was also enough to make her jump at the chance of a slot in a heated Chinatown room.

Yet more pressing than any of this was the need to earn double the amount of money she made on the beat for, as she said, 'Tyrone's habit went bad not long after we came down here. He needed to shoot up more and more every day. I had to get a steady job to help him.'

I asked Jackie how much money she gave every day to Tyrone to buy heroin.

She wiped her mouth diffidently with a serviette. 'At least a hundred, I reckon,' she said thoughtfully.

'£100, every day, just for heroin?'

'Some days, I guess . . . but I'm trying to get him to cut down, 'cos it's not right, is it? It's a terrible thing, smack.'

'Have you tried it?'

'I've only snorted it – I hate needles! I won't ever let anyone near me with a needle so there's no chance of me spiking up.'

'And what about Tyrone – does he want to come off?'

'Course he does! He's just a little sick now – he can't quit it yet. That's why I'm working so hard, so I can take us away, for a long holiday or something. If I can just get him out of this poxy country for a while I know he'll go straight.'

'Where would you want to go on holiday?' I asked.

'Just somewhere warm and cheap. Spain probably. But when I'm in my room with all these men breathing over me I often think I'd like us to escape to somewhere more exotic-like!'

'Like where?'

'I dunno, Egypt? Morocco, maybe. You're not supposed to want to go somewhere really foreign like Morocco if you're from Hull – you know what I mean?'

I did and I couldn't help laughing with her as she ordered us another couple of beers in an attempted 'Moroccan' accent.

'I know that there're probably plenty of drugs in Morocco too but I'd just dump me and Tyrone in a hotel near the edge of a desert somewhere. As long as there's a swimming pool for me we could straighten him out in no time.'

She made a happy little burping sound, her eyes shining with imagination. 'It's my dream, you see – a few months away, cleaning him out – in Spain or Egypt or, best of all, *Morocco!*'

Would this dream really happen?

'Like now, I have to say, "Yes, definitely yes!" I can see it. One day I'm just going to take the money I put away in my building society account and I'm going to book us

a flight. I'm gonna drag him on that plane with me, without any of his fucking needles, and we'll be gone from here. No-one'll know 'cept us. And I'll come back with Tyrone one day and we'll be real sun-people and all the girls will say, "And where've you been then? You look fuckin' fan-ta-stic!" An' I'll say, "Oh we've just been to Morocco, for our summer hols, just fuckin' *Morocco*."

'But then, when I'm in that fuckin' hole up there,' she jerked her head back in the direction of Lisle Street, 'sometimes I just wanna break down, you know. It feels like I'm stuck there for good. That I'm just gonna be a £15 Chinatown whore forever and that Tyrone's gonna die with the smack. I dunno – what do you think?'

'I think you should go to Morocco.'

'Yeah, you're right. Fly to Casablanca; Tyrone and me, like in the movies, like what's their names, you know those black and white movie stars.'

'Humphrey Bogart and Ingrid Bergman?'

'Yeah, baby, Tyrone as Humphrey Bogart! Is Bogart the guy who wore a patch over his eye? – 'cos Tyrone once had to wear a black patch on his eye, after a fight . . .'

'You should go to Morocco soon – with or without Tyrone.'

'Shit, I couldn't leave Tyrone – look, it's *forever* baby!'

Jackie started to stroke and kiss her tattoo, making gentle cooing noises which the Chinese waiter sensibly took as a sign to bring us the bill.

We stepped out into the scalding mid-afternoon heat and I bought Jackie an ice-cream, like she was my country cousin again. Still talking about her dream of mythical Morocco we ambled up to Soho Square, where I had met Alistair the Friday before. We found a spot in the shade, underneath a tree which Jackie leaned against. The tramp whom Alistair had walked over without a glance was sprawled across the same stretch of grass.

When I listen back to the tape we made that afternoon her words are interspersed with the incongruous sound of

birds singing in Soho. Her own voice, however, lowered in tone as she told me about her life as a 'Chinatown whore'. When she seemed too sad to speak further she looked away from the tramp and down at her tattoo, as if in search of courage to go on – whoring rather than just talking. But she spoke for more than an hour in her own moving, breathless way.

'I miss the sun when I work, you know,' she began. 'I miss seeing the day go by most of all. 'Cos it's always fucking dark in that room. They like it that way. You don't know what it means – to wake up and not to have to go to that room. You don't know what it means to me to go to a real Chinese restaurant and to sit here, like stretched out, all warm and happy in the sunshine. Unless you work there you can't ever know what it really means.

'Like now, look, it's three o'clock. By now, on a day in my room, I've already had maybe ten men shove their stinking cocks up me. Small cocks and big cocks, all sorts. Pricks all veiny or floppy. Dicks that smell like fucking cheese or onions. Maybe both – if I'm lucky!

'I won't have felt no sunshine. Not since I started working at eleven or twelve. I'll have just had ringing bells and doors opening and shutting and one man after another coming in and me saying, smiley-wiley, "Hello, love, it's fifteen for sex with a rubber, twenty for French and sex, fifty for half an hour, seventy-five for uniforms or bondage, hundred for an hour, hundred and fifty if you want to beat me . . ."

'And if they stay, and most of them do, it's usually just for a fifteen or a twenty job. They give me the money first – that's rule number one. I give it to Molly to hold on to. I tell them to get changed and, if there's no-one waiting, I go into the kitchen with Molly and I have me half a smoke. When I go back they're naked and they're looking at the porno mags or else they're standing in a corner, all frightened like. I feel sorry for them then. They look pathetic, like. Most of them are OK, to tell the truth. They just want a fuck and to get out of there as fast as they can.

'So I break open a rubber and I roll it on – "Always with a rubber," I say and I mean it. That's rule number two. Then I go down and I think of Tyrone or us in Morocco and I bob my head up and down a little. Not much but I still get the fucking taste of the rubber in my mouth. Then I wank them more, then I bob the head a little again and if I'm lucky they're hard and I lie back and I'm still greased from the time before. They slide it in, groaning and grunting some of them, asking if I like it. Others are quiet – the nicer ones even say, "I hope it's not hurting." Sometimes it does but I settle them in and off we go.

'Christ, it's just so boring. That's the worst thing. I hate it when they breathe all over me. I just turn away, even if they don't like it. But then I reach down and I hold their balls and I say, "It feels good, man – you've got such a big prick" or anything else like that. They believe it and they come soon then, jamming away at me. It takes a minute or two and they roll off and I feel, "Phew, another one down." I give them a tissue and they rip their rubber off and I dump it in the bin. They're all shy and quiet then. They're dressed and out of there before you know it. I fix my hair, fluff my knickers up and then I see the next one.

'I'm feeling horrible round this time – in the afternoon. It seems such a long way to go. But then Molly makes me a stew or something and after I eat, around five, I get a second wind. Just as well 'cos it gets busy then – all the punters fancy a quick screw after work, just before they go home to the missus. Most of them are married, I can tell. All my regulars are 'cept for one or two who're too shy to get an ordinary girl. I like them ones the best – they don't try to show off or nothing. It's them creeps just out the pub who think they can turn me on I hate – like I'm doing this for pleasure or something. Like they can show me a trick or two when that's just my job – turning fucking tricks like them, one after another. Them and weirdos like your mate – Alistair? They're the pits.

'It's busy on and off all night – but it can go quite quickly

until about ten. Then I'm knackered. On a regular day I can have forty men easily – hardly worth a blink. But it hits me when I get home. I just slump in the bath, I tell you. Tyrone's good sometimes – he makes me tea and stuff and puts me to bed. Tell you something else tho', there's no chance of a sex-life then – I'm fucked, forty times over, and the smack's got a hold of Tyrone. Maybe we'll catch up on sex when we get to Morocco – I hope so. I miss it sometimes, you know, fucking for love, fucking 'cos it's what *I want* . . .'

In the ceaselessness of this work, in its grinding inexorability, the mindless magnitude of being fucked daily by forty men inevitably overwhelms everything else – except for the dream, 'Morocco' in Jackie's mind, which still foams around the edges of each twelve-hour stretch of emptiness in this meagre Chinatown room. Even the horror of visitors like Alistair 'turning crazy' is nothing compared to the work's otherwise unremitting tedium and the accompanying, mythic reverie of moving elsewhere.

'That was a bad one, for sure,' Jackie said later in reference to Alistair's flogging of her, 'but to be honest I just shut stuff like that out. Otherwise it'd just drive me completely loopy. Maybe a hundred men walk through that door some days, a lot of them just to have a look, you know, time-wasters. But I still have to talk to every one of them. And how's it gonna be if each time I open the door to a man I think he's gonna beat me up? Nah, in this game you gotta have a bit of faith 'cos, as I said, most of them are fine, nervous as fucking kittens actually. But, yeah, I learnt something from that prick, that fucking Alistair. I'll watch out from now on.

'See, he caught me off guard. It was around nine and I was real tired. I wanted to pack up but that old bitch Molly always squeals if I shut up shop early. Then this Alistair guy comes in – real smooth like. Tells me his name, straight off. I remember that 'cos most of them never give their names, even false ones. He spoke real nice – he was

different to most of them. He took out about five crisp twenties, said he really liked the look of me but that he felt I needed a spank on my bottom, what did I think? I said, "Put down another three twenties and you'll probably find you're right." I'd done that sort of thing before, you know, pull on the old gym-slip, bend over his knee, take a bit of hand on the old butt. I don't care – let them do it if they pay me. Then I can make what it normally takes to fuck ten punters. So I tell ol' Molly not to let anyone else in – this is a big one, the last of the night.

So we go through the old schoolgirl thing – piece of piss really. I'm even having a bit of a lark to tell the truth. Then suddenly he goes crazy. He bends me over and he starts clubbing me with this cane. Fucking like he wants to knock my bleeding block off. Lucky he broke the cane when I started screaming. Gave him such a fright he caught the end of the bed and it cracked. Poor old Molly was having hysterics. She was sure I was a goner 'cos I was screaming blue murder. He'd already eased off by the time Alex from downstairs was banging on the door with her fucking shoe. He was all red and purple in the face like he was some kind of dog. I was just screaming, "What the fuck do yer think you're doing? Are you some kind of maniac?"

'He cooled down fast then. Started to smooth things over. I think he knew he'd gone too far. He took out more money from his trouser pocket – he'd kept them on – and he gives me another twenty and he goes out and gives Alex and Molly twenty each. Smooth as fucking butter. That's what scared me the most, you know – that they thought I had gone over the top, that no-one who dressed and spoke as well as him would go as far as I said he did. They told me to go home – I was just tired. They said it was nothing, to forget it. I dunno how he got away with it – you would have thought that they would've got the police out but no, to them, I'm just going over the top.

'Fuck it, you should've seen the bruises I carried home that night. I could hardly get into the fucking bath. Oh no,

boy, *I* won't forget him in a hurry – he's never coming through my door again and if I were you, mate, I'd steer well clear of him too. He's a dangerous one all right.'

The real danger, though, is always to the prostitute; for in the eyes of the police and the public, by the very nature of her vocation, she has invariably been 'asking for it'. Knowing this, Alistair can lay into a 'Chinatown whore' like Jackie, wave a few £20 notes debonairly and get away with grievous bodily harm.

I told Jackie about Alistair's Tuesday afternoon visits to Mandy Kavanagh, about the way in which roles were switched then and how she, 'The Terminator Angel', punished him.

'Oh yeah, great stuff baby!' she laughed. 'Tell your angel to give him a couple of biffs from me. Yeah, I love it!'

The problem, I pointed out, was that Alistair also liked it. Moreover, Mandy's hope that her beatings were keeping his hatred of women in check had been shattered by the news of his attack on Jackie.

'Ah, she sounds a bit of a love. I'd like to meet her some day and tell her not to worry. Creeps like that Alistair just keep rolling on – she shouldn't give her whole life up to worrying about what he'll do to other whores. She don't sound much like the girls round here.'

'Would you really like to meet her?'

'Yeah, she sounds amazing . . . but she wouldn't want to meet *me*, would she?'

It was difficult to tell whether Jackie's fascination was more intense than the compassion felt for her by Mandy and Simone. For an entire Monday afternoon there was an affinity between the three which stretched to their insisting that I stay with them, as their token male, in Mandy's blue room while they swapped stories about their very different modes of prostitution.

Apart from each other, this was the first time either Mandy or Simone had spoken to another working prostitute; Jackie, in contrast, said she 'shot the breeze with a whole

bunch of Chinatown whores almost every fucking day'. The difference showed. Mandy and Simone were astonished at the number of men Jackie fucked every day and kept asking if she felt her body was withstanding such punishment. Jackie, however, was less interested in discussing the humdrum elements of day-to-day intercourse than she was in telling the others about Tyrone and stressing to Mandy how she loved this 'fucking house' and that the two of them, 'The Terminator Angel' and *La Chienne de Souffrance* were 'way too fucking brainy and beautiful to be on the game'.

This was a cutting irony as both Mandy and Simone had wanted to meet Jackie so that they could encourage her to opt out of her kind of prostitution. Instead, they listened quietly while Jackie gave them some mildly reproachful stick for 'not using [their] brains more' – only to suddenly burst out in laughter at the supposed absurdity of her, 'just a tattooed Chinatown whore' as she kept calling herself, telling off two of London's most expensive and specialized 'post-grad' prostitutes.

It had only taken Jackie a few minutes to overcome her initial shyness at meeting Mandy and Simone in these comparatively lavish surroundings – from then on she literally ran the afternoon, to the extent of deciding what cakes I should go out and buy from Mandy's local patisserie. When I returned, Mandy and Simone had finally moved into a higher gear and were persuading Jackie that there were infinitely easier and more lucrative ways of making money as a prostitute than in her room downtown. After the caramel and cheese-cakes and a guided tour of Mandy's basement, Jackie, having produced a searing demonstration of what she'd do to Alistair on his favourite convex couch, promised that she'd think about everything they'd said. Basically, she admitted, she was sick to death of working in Chinatown. She wondered how much longer she would last there. Jackie was near tears when she'd said she'd keep in touch and come visit the two of them again 'sometime soon'.

As Jackie and I walked towards the South Kensington tube she was filled with excitement, saying that 'I could even be friends with those two – even if that Simone's a bit rich telling me to leave Tyrone when it sounds like she's got the same sort of dead-beat bloke round her neck.' But by the time we had reached the underground our laughter died for there was the dead weight around her own neck. Her breath caught sharply at the back of her throat when she saw Tyrone watching us from the opposite end of the street. It was only when she called his name that I realized that it was him. He walked towards us angrily, calling her a 'fucking bitch'. He looked painfully thin and ill but, clearly, there was still a wiry strength in him as he held her tightly by the wrist.

He turned on me, his black eyes burning and staring angrily. All I could see were crude tear marks tattooed down each of his cheeks, the tears which Jackie said they were going to have removed once they returned from Morocco. 'Please leave,' she said quietly to me, and then more urgently, 'Go, just go, will you?' So I left for the underground, only looking back once to where they stood on the opposite corner, holding each other. I could see that her tears were real.

I never saw Jackie again after that strange afternoon. When I next went to Chinatown and passed by her room, her adverts had been taken down. In their place there were others, without flowers around their borders, endorsing a 'friendly, versatile honey-blonde model'. When I knocked at her old third-floor door, the maid immediately started her 'Sorry love, she's busy' routine. When she heard I was looking for Jackie she said, simply, 'There's a new girl working here – she's very nice.' I asked her if she knew where Jackie had gone but closing the door, she said sourly, 'Naaah, she just disappeared. Good riddance – she never was good enough for this room, I'm telling you.'

On my way down, I stopped off to see Alex who was similarly uninterested in Jackie's whereabouts. 'Ah, fuck

her,' she said as she shook her curly hair in front of the mirror, 'she'll be all right. Off with that junkie boyfriend somewhere; they're hopeless, the pair of them.' She turned to face me, thrusting her large breasts out and pulling the front of her silvery body-suit away from her crotch as if to give herself a needed breath of air. 'Do you fancy fucking me instead of talking about her – I'll suck you first, for fifteen, just for you. I've got a hot mouth, I promise.'

As I shook my head and said 'bye' instead, a shutter of hardness seemed to drop down the length of Alex's face. 'Well, fuck you too,' she called faintly after me as I walked down the stairs, hoping that Jackie had finally made it to Casablanca.

Chapter Eight

Benoni-boy and the Bed-show Girls

He had seen me walking towards the narrow doorway. Setting his espresso to one side and lighting a small cigar, he watched me through the filmy flare of smoke. He was always interested in the type of man who went to those rooms.

Then, he said later, I surprised him. I just stood at the entrance for a minute or two, seemingly lost in some meandering thought. This made me look shameless to him. He knew then, right off, that I had not just been at the receiving end of a fifteen, or even a twenty, pound fucking. If that *had* been the case, he laughed, I would have walked briskly out of there like everyone else. My head would have been down and my hands sunk deep into any pockets they could find. If I was married, as most of them were, I would also have checked to see who, if anyone, was monitoring the leaving of the clientele through that dark blue door.

As he watched me looking casually at the strips of paper adverts lining the black and white panelled wall he wondered if I was perhaps the landlord. Who else, apart from the landlord or an utter fool, would loiter so intently round those whore-rooms? And then, he grinned, he saw what I was wearing and he was sure that no pimping entrepreneur had ever looked that dishevelled.

Tagged his fool then, I had finally left the doorway and made the short walk towards the pavement table where he was sitting. For a crazy moment he thought I was about to join him. Yet I brushed by without even noticing him and

sat instead at a table on the other side of the entrance to the Italia café. He saw me peering through the doorway at some silent, year-old footage of AC Milan running on the big screen at the end of the bar. He turned around in his seat, too, and saw Ruud Gullitt, dreadlocks flying, flick a ball through to Van Basten who checked once, twice, before side-footing home in the bottom left-hand corner.

He forgot everything for a while then as he drew on his cigar and stared at the flickering Italian league football unfolding before him. It had always been his only sport from way back, long before he and his mother had returned to Europe. And then, in one of those curious coincidences that still made his life worth living, he heard that accent again. It was maybe a little softer than he had remembered but, still, it was unmistakable. He looked round with a feeling close to amazement; for his fool was speaking to the smiling Italian girl who had brought him his espresso.

'And so where in South Africa are you from then?' he called across the tables to me in his own distinctive London accent.

I looked at him with a deep, inward sigh. Why do I always get them? 'Johannesburg,' I replied with what was meant to be an edge of finality in my voice.

'You know Benoni then?' he said, all smiles now.

I knew Benoni all right. Benoni is a dull little town about twenty miles outside of my own hometown, Germiston, the South African equivalent of Luton, just east of Johannesburg. But it still gave me a perverse kind of thrill to meet someone in London who had even heard of Benoni.

'Well, I'm actually from Germiston,' I called back, even smiling myself now.

'Ah, Germiston! Sure, Germiston! The biggest railway junction in South Africa!' he enthused.

That was one of its charms, I agreed, pulling up a chair for this definitively swarthy man with the North London accent, who had come over to my table in delight at our supposed Benoni bond. It was debatable quite what the

Italian waitress made of this parochial exchange but she kept on smiling and soon returned with another espresso for the Benoni-boy, who actually looked well-entrenched in middle age, and a cappuccino for me. Pumping my hand excitedly, he told me to call him 'Michel', or 'Michael' if I felt more comfortable, or even 'Mickey' if I must. I told him my name and said he could call me anything he liked, except 'Donny'.

For some reason this tickled him. He rocked back and forth with laughter, so much so that the coffee cups shook as if we were travelling on a train. From then on he always called me 'Donny-boy'.

As we sat at our rickety table, soaking up the nostalgia of Benoni and Germiston which felt as tangible again as the late-afternoon autumn sunlight screening Frith Street, he told me about his fleeting South African past. His father was from Cyprus and soon after the Second World War he had travelled to London where he met Michel's mother – an Islington girl of Cypriot stock. They married a few months after meeting and travelled down to Southampton one Sunday morning. The next night they sailed to South Africa – where one of Michel's uncles had emigrated a few years previously and found plenty of sunshine and work as a white emigrant. Michel's parents settled in Benoni, in a small house across the road from his uncle. Six months later he was born, a 'Benoni baby', he laughed, having been conceived at sea which, he said wryly, possibly explained why his mother always said he had such 'stormy good looks'. He would have preferred it, he exclaimed, puffing on a new cigar, if this had been the way the girls, rather than his mother, had described him.

But he only started noticing girls long after he and his mother left Benoni, when his father died. Michel was ten then and they returned to Islington, where they moved in with his maternal grandparents. He had lived in North London ever since, even though his mother died too before he was twenty. A week before his birthday she was killed in a car accident.

When his grandparents died in quick succession a few years later, he was bereft of any family in London. That had been a hard time for him and he even considered returning to Benoni. Instead, he sold his grandparents' house and with the proceeds bought himself a flat just off Upper Street. To fill his spare time, when he wasn't working as an apprentice carpenter, he began to redecorate his flat. When he decided to sell it a few years later his handiwork had trebled its value. He bought another flat and the same process was almost inadvertently repeated. Before he knew it, he was able to buy two new flats – one of which he let out to tenants. Michel was in early on the London property boom in the late 1960s and, if he had been especially interested in money, he might have become a very rich man. But he fell in love and became less interested in buying up cheap properties and redoing them.

Michel told me this much of his life history in the time it takes to drink a couple of coffees and, as interesting a story-teller as he was, I must have glanced at my watch when he asked me to explain how I had ended up in London after starting out in Germiston. He looked strangely hurt that I was even thinking of terminating our brief meeting.

'How about a quick pint over the road?' he said almost forlornly. Perhaps it was the way he suddenly averted his eyes from mine which made me realize his essential aloneness. Considering this, as well as our South African past, it suddenly seemed churlish to do anything but agree to his suggestion.

'Fantastic, Donny-boy, fantastic,' Michel said with serious ebullience, 'and the first drinks are on me. The Benoni-boy always buys the first round.'

I wasn't sure how many rounds I was keen to stay for but, after the second, just when I was preparing to finally take my leave of Benoni-boy, Michel startled me. He told me then that he had seen me standing in the blue-doored passageway just before we met, that he had even thought I might be a landlord too.

For a second I thought he meant that he owned such rooms in Soho. Then, from his embarrassment, I gathered again that he was the landlord to more respectable properties elsewhere.

'You obviously know what happens in those rooms,' he said shyly.

'I think I do,' I said equally coyly.

'It's an interesting business,' he said and then as if not to offend me, 'in a way, I guess.'

The certainty with which he said those first words encouraged me to tell him the now familiar story of the book I was writing.

'Fantastic, Donny-boy, fantastic,' he enthused, thumping me on the back. After a pregnant pause, in which time he decided to temper his excitement in case I got the wrong idea about him, he murmured with more restraint, 'It's a world that's not that well-known is it? It's a British-type secret. That's why I'm a Cypriot first, a South African second and only a Brit third and last. How can I be British when they are so hung up about prostitution?'

It was tempting to point out that the Cypriot legislative record on prostitution was hardly unblemished but I stuck closer to home and berated the singularly South African style of official hypocrisy pertaining to sex – particularly when looked at over the course of apartheid during the retarded 'Immorality Act' decades when sex 'across the colour-line' was forbidden.

'Oh, but Donny-boy, Benoni is Benoni,' he argued with unimpeachable logic. 'This is fucking London – supposed to be one of the freest cities in the world and look how fucked-up it is! No-one gets to grips with what prostitution means. You expect that in Benoni maybe, but not in London.'

I knew what he meant and, also, I was intrigued by this burst of passion. What did prostitution mean to him, I wondered, as he went over to get us another couple of drinks. By the time it was my turn again I had still not asked

him, thinking it only right that I should reveal to him first what I had found in my previous eight months.

So I told him who I had met, ending with a summation of Jackie's disappearance six weeks before; how it had been Jackie I had been thinking of, still wondering where she was, when he had seen me standing so pensively in the doorway earlier that afternoon. Her abrupt vanishing act had disturbed me and I could not even find a photograph of her on Docherty's wall. Despite my hope, I did not really believe she had made it to Morocco. I was sure she was working elsewhere as a prostitute – perhaps in conditions even worse than those she had endured in Chinatown. In disappearing, however, she had shown me how ephemeral the protagonists were in any one corner of prostitution. No matter how regular a face might appear to become, the substance of the work created a constant whirl of upheaval in a prostitute's life. This was especially so in a city like London where the law offered so little protection to prostitutes. For all I knew Jackie could have been beaten up badly again by Alistair or by Tyrone, or any of their equally brutal punter or pimping equivalents. What recourse then would she have to refuge from the law, with no safe 'house' from which to work as a prostitute?

Worn out by my own tirade I went back to the bar for some needed sustenance. Michel was so far into his next cigar that he was engulfed by the clouds of smoke. But his words were clear enough when I sat down again. 'I wouldn't be too worried about Jackie – she's a tough nut.'

'How would you know?' I asked Michel bemusedly.

'I visited her once in Lisle Street – not long after she started there.'

'You did?' I repeated.

'Yeah. I know quite a few of the girls from around here. I'm what they call a "punter". One of their regulars, if you like.'

Maybe it was the fact that we had started talking to each other because of Benoni, for I could not hide my surprise. 'So you really knew Jackie too?'

'Only once – to tell you the truth she wasn't a very good prostitute. A sweet girl, I'm sure, if you got to know her. But, as a hooker she was lousy. Very unprofessional. Not like Virna or Natasha, the older French women. Have you met them?'

They were based in Frith Street and I had seen their adverts; but on the one day when I'd paid their room a visit, their wheezing Italian maid shook her small head sadly and said, 'Very, very busy today!'

'Different class to a kid like Jackie, really, them two. But, you know Donny-boy, Jackie was lousy as a prostitute because her heart just wasn't in it. And who can blame her for that? Not me. But I could always tell she was thinking of moving on out of that room even before you gave me this Morocco story. Now I'm not saying she's made it to Casablanca but she'll be all right. She's a tough cookie, that one, junkie boyfriend or not.'

I was still unsure whether I'd developed a sentimental attachment to Jackie as my mythical 'country cousin' or if the others, the maid and Alex and now Michel, were right – and she was always going to land on her feet no matter what Tyrone or Alistair did to her. But Michel was already enraptured by another subject – the elusive, ultimately empty thrill embedded into the very core of both prostitution and pornography. He was crisply incisive and I found myself in that curiously anti-social mood of wanting to find another empty tape to record his words for posterity. But, instead, I switched off my saturated recorder and just listened. An hour later he said he'd repeat it all again, 'more clearly', on tape, if I really wanted 'to interview Benoni-boy again'. He'd cook me a 'real Benoni-Cypriot meal', in Holloway of all places, where he now lived. 'In the meantime,' he said as a way of parting, 'don't loiter in those Soho corridors unless you really do want to be a pimp from Germiston . . .'

He lived in a large house, in one of Holloway's less grim roads, not far from Highbury Fields where, whatever the

weather, he would walk most evenings. The house was immaculate and it was obvious that he had not just tidied it for my benefit; rather, it had the feel of a home which was always kept clean and cared for.

'I once brought a prostitute home for the night,' he remembered as he showed me around the house, 'and she said that there are only two types of men who are able to keep a clean, decent home – a man who is gay and a man who is sorrowful. She meant, firstly, a homosexual and then, secondly, another kind of man, a man who has given up the idea of ever being in love with a woman again. She knew I wasn't gay, you know, a "poof", so I think she knew what she was talking about. And she was right about me in that way. When I was much younger, when I still thought that maybe I would marry one day, I was terrible. The house was like a pig-sty. Clothes unwashed, dirty dishes everywhere, socks lost in the fruit basket, dust all over . . . and being a normal Cypriot-South African bachelor living in North London I was waiting for a woman to arrive and sort me out. Terrible, isn't it? Then one day I just knew it was not going to happen and so I scrubbed the house from top to bottom, sorted everything out, and I've kept it that way ever since. I may be alone forever but because of that I'm not going to live in a dirty hole any more. So, it's tidy, hey – for a Benoni-boy, especially!'

Michel's constant allusions to his Benoni-boy status were less endearing than they were a lumbering cover-up of a hermetic kind of hurt. When he told me about the day he discarded his newly bought answerphone he made me understand that where I had initially thought he was just a man who lived alone he was, in reality, lost in a more corrosive kind of solitude. His house was neatly maintained and the meal he served me – Greek salad, home-cooked kebabs marinated in wine, followed by baklava, coffee and tumblers-full of ouzo – was a model of appetising efficiency. But as the evening wore on it felt like I was being gathered into the basic wilderness of the life he lived. Where

some people, like Lee Docherty, can be sustained by an essential apartness, there are others who suffer from loneliness. Michel, as he knew only too well, for all his laughter and jokey Benoni-boy endurance, was such a casualty.

'I read in the newspaper once,' he said, 'that an answerphone can change your life. When you are out all kinds of people might phone. Your family, your friends, even your long-lost friends, maybe even some new people who could be your friends. You didn't know who you could be missing when you were out. So I went out and bought one of these machines. I got it working and the next time I went out I turned it on. I came in a few hours later and there were no messages. No problem, these things take time. I waited a whole two weeks, went out every day and most nights, often just to be out the house so someone would call. Nothing. Every time I came in the red light was still. The instructions said if someone called it would flash. I checked the machine – it was working. It wasn't the machine's fault, even though I hated it. I never had one message on that fucking machine. What is the point of me having an answerphone when no-one calls? So I gave it away to the people who live in the second flat I own. I said, "Take it, have it for free, it's no use to me." '

It's only right that silence should follow such a speech for what is there to say that would not sound either trite or dismissive of this hurt? So we drank our ouzo and I searched for a fire to look into, for it is at moments like these that you need flames to stare at – either in meditative contemplation or despair. But the evenings were still only cool outside and so the hearth was covered by a basket of dried flowers. I looked instead at the bottom of my glass. Then, clearing his throat slightly, Michel reached over and poured me another shot of fiery ouzo. He stoked his own chimney with another drink and tried to look more cheerful.

'But you get used to it. It's not as if I sit around and worry about it. I get out, I do have friends to see. It's just that

most of them drink with me in the pub down the road. They have no reason to call me. They know they can always catch me at the pub. Sometimes we go to a game – at Arsenal or Spurs – or we play as a quiz-team against other pubs. It's not bad. And then, the times when the loneliness does get me, when I am not so good, I go out and I have sex and it makes me feel much better – for a while at least, until the next time.'

In the ensuing moment of savage intimacy, when I felt acutely the cheapness of my question, I asked him if he only had sex with prostitutes.

Ironically, he seemed to welcome the question. 'Oh yes, Donny-Boy, I can hardly remember the last time I had sex with any woman who was not a prostitute.'

I liked the fact that he could say this without even a trace of the self-pity that had filtered through his earlier comments.

'I see at least five or six prostitutes a month. All kinds of prostitutes. Mostly around Soho because it's easy then. I just walk up the stairs and I'm in – usually only with a little wait. But I also go to prostitutes who advertise in shop-windows and newspapers. Sometimes I even call an escort agency if I feel rich. Why not? I have nothing else to spend my money on.'

'When did you start visiting prostitutes so often?' I asked.

'Nine, ten years ago maybe. A long time now!'

'You must have met a lot of prostitutes!'

'Sure! Too many to count! But often I find a favourite one and I see only her. She's like my girlfriend then. But, always, I move on. It's only to some of them that I keep going back. Like to Virna in Soho. There is no better value in town: £20 and she gives you everything – a dignified prostitute too. First you go in and she talks to you a little while you undress and then she washes you gently in her bidet, talking all the time in that soft French voice. Then she moves over to the bed and there are mirrors all around and she massages you a little bit and when you are ready

she rolls the condom on and then she sucks like magic. A beautiful blow job, every time. Then I slide gently, slowly into her. I can see us together in the mirrors and all the time she is playing this music on her cassette. It's very strange. Music like whales calling under the sea to each other. So, to Virna, I always go back. And, when she is away, to Natasha, who is much older but also very special. She is a healer of some sort. I'm not sure what sort but she knows many things. They are like my oldest girlfriends in town.'

'Do you sometimes yearn for a girlfriend you can call your own, someone who is not a prostitute?' I asked.

'I used to a lot. Now, only sometimes. Long ago, more than twenty years ago, I was in love with this woman. The one I told you about the other day, the one I fell for when I was doing up my first two flats. Sarah. That was her name. We were in love, we were going to be married. Or so I thought. Then one day, after about two years of us being together, she takes me for a walk in the park. She asks me if I remember Antony, the man she used to go out with before me. I say, "Sure, I know the guy, what about him?" She says, "Well I saw him the other day and I think I'm still in love with him. I think I want to marry him." I can't fucking believe it! "But you're going to marry me," I say. And she stands there, with tears rolling down her cheeks and she says, "You know I love you." And I shout, "Of course you fucking love me!" She just starts to shake her head and really cry and she says, "I'm sorry, Michel, I'm sorry . . ." Turns out she loves this fuckwit more than she loves me. Fuck, I really tried with her. I loved her. And then she did that to me. She says she didn't mean to hurt me, that's just the way she is, and so she's sorry. I told her, "Forget it, it's all right, go to him. I love you, but if that's what you want, you go to him." I never saw her again. She called for a while, she wrote to see if I was fine. I never answered. From then on I never really wanted a girlfriend, even the idea of a wife. How could I, after she hurt me like that? Look, I don't blame her – she was a good, decent

woman. But she spoiled me for anyone else. Ever since then I've felt alone inside. Ever since then I've been on my own.'

Michel said it was difficult to talk about such things but he felt he could say them to me. It was not so much the formality of the recorder between us, acting as some kind of confessional spur, but the fact that I was a writer. Since he had met me the week before he had thought a lot about writing. Surely there was little work as lonely as a writer's? All those hours you had to spend at a desk, completely on your own, writing about feelings, writing about love and the loss of love. He thought it must be beautiful in a way – that kind of aloneness, when you were building something of your own, word by word, sentence by sentence. He felt it was very different to his own loneliness.

Michel's words had their own kind of grave beauty. But, as I said to him, with this book the problem was more one of being engulfed by people, by the magnitude of feelings they had shared with me, in all sorts of ways and different kinds of settings, about prostitution. Moments such as these were almost unbearably intimate – it was a sharing of something, of another's hurt. And because theirs was an intensely personal pain, the interviews inevitably forced real people into this book. Writing another sort of book, a fictional book, would be perhaps lonelier but certainly less fraught with the problem of trying to do justice to the words and feelings of all those who had been around me during the 'building' of such a book.

'Ah, but still,' he went on to remark with brutal precision, 'even with all these people, Donny-boy, you're still writing about the loneliest subject of all. I know the loneliness of it well, that's all I can say . . .'

Even though he could not immediately elucidate this theme I felt he had struck a curious seam of truth in that one line. For prostitution was almost always about separating one self from another, exchanging what Simone Maillard called one's 'real' self for another persona. There were few acts lonelier than abandoning the self you saw

as your own for a repeatedly shifting set of identities.

In the very grain of the act, of selling sex, fundamental barriers separated the prostitute from the client. Money, more even than that detachment of self, reinforced prostitution's main support wall. It was the solidity of that wall, that professionalism, which made prostitution such an essential vocation in a broken-up world; for by giving up themselves both physically and emotionally, prostitutes allowed their clients the freedom to fill in their own raging needs or fantasies. Those walls protected the prostitutes but also created an inevitable isolation, leaving them exposed to an acute form of loneliness.

'There are many prostitutes I know who are lonely,' Michel said as he listened to these ideas, 'because they give up so much of themselves. They give up their bodies, their names, their hearts, themselves even to keep doing their work. That's why I admire so many of them so much, that's why many of the people I care most about are these women, these prostitutes. I understand that loneliness because I feel it too. Each time I see a new prostitute, a new woman, I am very excited. But as soon as I come, the thrill is gone. There is some emptiness there. I am alone again so quickly. But at least it's not pain I feel, it's a dull feeling. Then I forget all that a week later. I feel that thrill coming again and it starts all over – only it goes as soon as I come . . .'

Michel's loneliness lined his heart's most private recesses, stemming from his feeling of being deserted by those he had loved. But it came to me as a conspicuous kind of metaphor for the lonely, shifting thrill offered by both prostitution and pornography. Because they are both billion pound businesses – in which contrived themes of excitement and pleasure are produced, advertised and then consumed – there are fixed parameters for the 'thrill-seekers' as much as the 'thrill-givers'. Those boundaries are money-lined and the interaction between the sex-worker and the sex-consumer is usually less a relationship than a transaction.

For the consumer, the bringing of 'fantasy into reality' can only be a transient experience, a sexual encounter whose pretended intimacy is forever filtered through the barriers of cash, the separating glass in a peep-show booth, the erotic dance stage, the telephone, the glossy magazine page, the cinema and television screen. Inevitably it is, as Michel said just before I left his home that night, money which 'chills the thrill'.

For him this is not necessarily a bad thing, for it buffers his vulnerable heart against too deep an emotional involvement. Some might argue that Michel's loneliness is exacerbated by his consumption of both pornography and prostitution; if he did not have access to these 'crutches' of fantasy then perhaps he would force himself into more 'normal' relationships, even at the risk of emotionally hurting himself. But this argument has to be based on the reductive assumption that consumer sex can *only* be irredeemably alienating and isolating.

And, looking at Michel again, another perception emerged. Despite his acknowledgment of prostitution's intrinsic boundaries, Michel was still able to uncover and invest compassion in prostitution. Certainly his description of having sex with Virna in Soho had an almost lyrical tenderness. Perhaps I was tantalised by his melodramatic justifications, but in his attachment to prostitution I felt he was reaching out to others: to women, who happened to be prostitutes, willing to haul him out of his maudlin solitude. Consequently he was sentimental about prostitutes; but that was also because his feelings for these women penetrated the dividers which delineate the sex business.

This unspoken empathy between the prostitute and the client, against all odds, often adds a different dimension to what would otherwise be just a business arrangement. Many prostitutes stress this side of their work – where the selling and the consuming is still imbued with 'caring', with 'feeling'. Their attempted subversion of the 'chilled thrill' can only increase when the laws relating to prostitution

change and other ways of selling sex are permitted – where safety, cleanliness and public openness replace the type of squalid and shame-ridden sex of back-streets and whore-rooms.

For that to happen, for prostitutes to be sufficiently empowered to control their own working environments and create their own chosen styles of brothels, the 'ownership' of the sex industry will have to change as much as the law. In pornography, despite the dogmatic refusals to accept such truths from the blinkered likes of Andrea Dworkin, there has been a subtle shift – at least in America. The pornography of Candida Royale, the performed eroticism of Annie Sprinkle and the creation of organizations like the Prostitutes Of New York (PONY) have transformed the way in which sex is sold. Their pornography and prostitution have been extricated from male entrepreneurs and placed back into the hands of women sex workers themselves. So sex, in these rare American spaces, is consumed differently than it is here. There, the estrangement typically inherent to the sex trade is being clipped back as women also become consumers and owners in the business; here, however, that loneliness just seems to grow wider and deeper, as Michel confirmed.

Although his consumption had more to do with compassion than cruelty, Michel was not that dissimilar to Alistair. Quintessentially, they both prided themselves on being international connoisseurs of the sex industry. Michel, twice a year, 'rewarded' his solitary fortitude with a holiday in one of the sex capitals of the world – Amsterdam, Copenhagen, Hamburg, Paris, New York, Los Angeles, Bangkok or Rio. The last was his least favourite for although the prostitutes were amongst the most beautiful he had ever seen, they were invariably transvestites – and, as Michel stressed, he was more a sorrowful than a gay man.

During the course of these sex-trips he gives compassion a break in order to cast a more critical eye over the prostitution and pornographic wares on display. London

lags behind and, moreover, dishes up the most despondent sex-for-sale scenarios he has ever witnessed in all his jaunts across the humping and grinding globe. There is no lonelier, more heartbreaking place to consume sex than in one of Soho's few remaining, rancid peep-show booths. He suggested strongly, as 'one loner to another', a phrase I was not quite sure how to take, that I subject myself to the ordeal. When he heard that I had already done the rounds with Alistair he told me that I should still meet two of the 'saddest but sweetest' girls who had ever worked a Soho bed-show.

Back in the dreaded booth again I saw a miserable-looking woman in her late-twenties lolling around a double bed. She wore a baby-blue suspender belt, flesh-coloured stockings and a pair of bright yellow high-heeled shoes. In haphazard time to Donna Summer's *I Feel Love* disco opus, she brushed her hands across her breasts and inner thighs. She looked desultorily round the circle of windows. By another trick of modern science she could see into each of the occupied booths – an opportunity which the peepers were fortunately spared.

Watching the way she licked her lips snidely in the direction of two windows – mine and another a little to my left – I reckoned there was only one other peeping fool wasting a pound coin at this time on a wet Friday afternoon. He may well have been one of Alistair's Japanese business associates for she seemed to be playing up to his booth rather than mine. As she turned more towards that window I noticed that while one buttock featured a small tattoo of a butterfly, the other was marked by a yellowish bruise. But she looked desperately bruised by boredom and after a minute I felt myself succumbing to the same tedium. As if in deference to this feeling, the light suddenly switched itself back on. My minute of peeping was over.

But I had come prepared. Michel had told me that he was a casual friend of this particular bed-show girl, the girl with the little butterfly tattoo. I wasn't sure exactly what he meant

by 'casual' but he knew her sufficiently well to tell me that she was from Rotterdam and that she called herself Vicki. As he said, it was sometimes difficult to make personal contact with the bed-show girls when their hulking boss, 'Mort', was around the peeping premises, he suggested that I hold up a note to her saying that I was a friend of Michel and that I wanted to have a quick word with her in the pub across the road. Being an ingenious Benoni-born, peep-show connoisseur, he suggested that I write this note in Afrikaans seeing that it is a language which derives from Old Dutch. It would be a linguistic gesture of solidarity with Vicki, he argued, even though he himself couldn't speak a word of Afrikaans and she spoke perfect English.

So, feeling more ridiculous than ever, I slid another coin into the slot and held my already written message up against the screen. The other booth must have emptied because Vicki was sneaking in a quick lie-down. But as my booth light went out she went back to work, rubbing herself absently between her legs. She soon saw that I was holding paper in my hand and thinking it must be money she rolled quickly my way. Her subsequent puzzlement at seeing my note soon gave way to a burst of giggling and head-shaking. I had written, '*Verskoen my, Vicki. Ek is 'n vriend van Michel. Kan ek met u praat in die "pub" asseblief?*' (In English, this absurdly ungrammatical Afrikaans message basically read as follows: 'Excuse me, Vicki. I am a friend of Michel. Can I talk to you in the pub, please?')

I was mildly drunk when I first agreed that this might be a good idea, and in a similar state while holding up my Afrikaans card; but, even accounting for a few Guinnesses, it was still ludicrous. Yet it worked. Vicki, still laughing, pointed to her wrist and held up two fingers, in a polite 'V' sign. At first glance I took this to mean that she'd see me in two minutes' time but as she spun her hand around her wrist I gathered she was talking in terms of hours. She was still smiling and shaking her head as the light blazed on, separating us from peeping view.

She arrived in the pub bang on time and if it hadn't been for the fact that she was still laughing I wouldn't have recognized her with her butterfly covered up. She was tall and thin with her black hair falling around her face like a mop. That was the significant difference – apart from the boots, mini-skirt, tank-top and leather jacket she was now wearing – between her in the street and on the bed, where her hair had been tied back by a scarf.

Before we had exchanged greetings she exclaimed, 'Do you *really* know what you said on your card?'

'I think so,' I said with the certainty that I obviously did not.

'You said "Wash me, Vicki!" Why?'

'Wash you?'

'*Verskoen my!* It means "wash me" in Dutch!'

'And "excuse me" in Afrikaans . . .'

'Well, it made me laugh at least. If your Dutch had been perfect maybe I wouldn't be here. So, dirty boy, you're the writer?'

'How did you know that?' I asked.

'Michel told Toni – you know, my girlfriend – the other day. I was expecting you, but not that you'd be looking for a wash!'

A little tetchily, I felt the joke had nearly run its course so I bought Vicki a double Scotch to muffle her laugh. I was glad, however, that I'd given her some pleasure for her last two hours must have been grindingly dull on the bed and Michel had stressed that she was normally 'a very angry girl'.

Her anger flared sporadically later that night when we were joined by her lover Toni, a quiet waif of a London girl who shared bed-show duties with Vicki. We stumbled into the Passage To India restaurant round the corner and, much to the bewilderment of the waiters and surrounding Friday night diners, Vicki proceeded to loudly blitz her way through the despairing backdrop to Soho bed-show work. Toni and I stuck timidly instead to our onion bhajis, nans and chicken korma dishes.

'Look, I've been around,' Vicki began affirmatively. 'I worked for three years in Amsterdam in live-sex show bars. You know, the type of place where you quickly learn to physically pick up the guilders with your pussy-lips. It makes men laugh and so you do it. It's not the greatest work but I stuck it for three years. I did more than OK. They liked me. They said I had the tightest pussy in Amsterdam 'cos I held on to that money so well.

'Then I got itchy feet. I wanted to live somewhere other than the Netherlands. I could speak French not too badly, English quite well. I thought, well, Paris first, then London. After three weeks in Paris I got a job. A peep-show girl in Montparnasse, in rue de la Gaîté, this old street. Before it was a porno place it was a house where Trotsky once lived. I always found that sad, that a place where someone like Trotsky stayed should become a sex showroom.

'Anyway, in this place, I would do private shows for men. For five hundred francs they could jerk off in a booth with me while I played around with a vibrator. Of that money I'd get maybe two hundred francs for myself. But I was the lesbian-show specialist. Me and this other girl would put on a show for a thousand francs. But I didn't like her too much. I didn't think she was always clean so I left that job.

'Now I'm telling you all of this to show that Amsterdam- and Paris are not perfect. No way! But there is much more respect for the girls there than here, especially in Amsterdam. There you're a working woman. A professional. Here we are just meat to these peep-show owners. They care fuck-all for us. And the booths you guys stand in are so horrible that I don't blame any of the men for not coming. This is the way it works here. There is no respect – not for the girls, not for the johns. Fuck all! It makes me sick!

'But in Amsterdam, even in Montparnasse, we worked in almost civilised places. They were kept clean, they were warm, there was some money to be made for the girls. The men weren't frightened and so they were nicer to us – more

generous, kinder even. Even to a lesbian like me. But here it's horrible. Here we make so little and the work is so boring it makes me miss using my pussy on those Amsterdam tables and my Montparnasse vibrators. That tells you how bad it is here! Soho is finished!'

The Passage To India patrons had gone ominously quiet, no doubt stunned by this scathing indictment of the very area in which they were seated. But Vicki could also be a sensitively polite girl. Suddenly realizing the loudness of her voice she called out, 'Sorry, I got carried away, forgive me!' From then on she spoke in a softer voice – ironically, I noticed, to the disappointment of more than one couple who were forced to return reluctantly to their comparatively mundane topics of conversation.

Why did she feel Soho had become such a bleak, exploitative peep-show setting?

'Well maybe it's much better in a way for other people. They don't have to see too many of these places. But what has happened is that only the worst rip-offs have stayed open. They are in league with the police maybe. The police know about these places but they don't do much. Instead they go around arresting poor street-girls just trying to do their work. Now I like the English very much – look at Toni, I love her – but they are very backward when it comes to this kind of sex. They try to push it under the carpet, to say it's not really there. But it's here and it stinks.'

'How much longer are the two of you going to stick it out in Soho, then?'

'We're already on our way out. I'm telling you. We're going to do telephone sex instead.'

'Hopefully that's less boring than the bed-show work,' I said.

'It is, thank the fuck!'

Trying to include Toni in our discussion I asked her if she had done any telephone sex work. She shook her head and said softly, 'Not yet. They said I must work on me

accent. It's 'cos I'm from the East End. They don't think it's "posh" enough!'

Vicki's voice went up another few octaves as soon as Toni had finished her sentence. 'Can you believe it? They take me, with my Dutch accent, and yet they don't want her because her accent is too much like a London accent! Which fucking country are we living in? Christ, this class thing here makes me so angry. They think every English girl must speak like the Queen! But I've told Toni she should just stay as she is – she'll get some telephone work soon!'

'How've you been doing on the phone then, Vicki?' I asked.

'Oh not bad! But it's fucking hard work talking dirty to an Englishman! I can promise you that. You would be different – you're so fucking dirty you have to hold up cards saying "Clean me!" With the British it's different. I get given a number to call. The guys are always very nervous, giggling on the other end of the line. I used to start off in a husky voice: "Hi there, this is Tammi. I'm a very randy Dutch girl and I lurve to talk dirty!" Now if this was in Amsterdam the guy would be away. Not here. I have to drag it out of them. "What is your favourite fantasy?" I ask them. In Holland the guy would say something like "I like to eat pussy while a hot bitch sticks a dildo up my arse." Then you talk dirty to him for a minute or two and he comes. He's happy, you're happy.

'Here in England it's different. Ten minutes later the guy tells me his fantasy is talking dirty on the telephone. He's already doing it – except he won't talk dirty to me. I have to do all the work. I'm saying, "My pussy's so wet, my juice is running all the way into the crack of my arse. I'm so hot. I need some of your hard cock in me." I think I'm doing not too bad – but there's just silence on the other end of the line. "Don't you like the way I talk?" I ask the guy sadly. "Oh no, I love it," he says. "I've got an erection, really. Please go on." Fuck, it's one-way traffic, baby! After half an hour he sighs, "I'm going to come, I'm going to come,"

and I want to say, "I want to scream with happiness, I can put down this telephone, I can go and suck some throat sweets now!" But I want to keep this job. So I just moan, "Aaaaahhhhh, yes, shoot over me, baby!" So don't laugh, it's fucking hard work for me!'

Toni and I were virtually rolling off our chairs and it was only the frowning Indian head-waiter who kept us in check. Trying to get serious again was difficult. Had she always done this kind of 'non-contact' sex work rather than any more conventional form of prostitution?

'Well, look, I don't mind if you call me a prostitute. That's fine. I know I'm selling my sex. But I have a rule. No man touches me, not for any money. At most I'll give a peep-show guy a hand-job. But that doesn't happen much.'

'It must still be difficult, as a lesbian, selling stock male fantasies all the time.'

'Without there being any touching it's not too difficult. I don't hate men – well only "Mort" and the guys who run these peep-show places round here. I just find it boring. I'm a lesbian and I have a lover so there's no question of me having real sex with a man. So that has always made me a peep-show girl and a telephone girl rather than a straight prostitute. It would be nice to do some more erotic lesbian stuff for women but you don't get much chance to do that in London. New York is the place for that – so let's hit the Big Apple, Toni-baby!'

Toni, not a girl of many words and obviously well-accustomed to everything that Vicki had already said, merely replied, 'Anytime you like, baby' before returning to her Kulfi ice-cream. For a waif, she packed away an incredible amount of food. I asked Vicki how helpful, or perhaps damaging, it was working with a lover in the same bed-show parlour.

'We like it. We're inseparable, you know. A double-act, in every way. But for other girls it's maybe not so good. You're together a lot of the time. For us, it helps. Because

when the one gets down then the other lifts her a little. That's what I really think all prostitutes and porno girls need more than anything else – support. Support from each other of course, but also support from politicians to change the laws. We're not going away – so let them accept it and make things better for both the whores and the johns!'

'That's what Michel always says.'

'Ah Michel – he's sad, but very sweet!'

'Those are the exact words he said about you two,' I remembered.

'Shit, Michel always says everyone is sad! I'm just glad he thinks we're sweet.'

'He made us an ace meal at his place one night,' said the waif with a burp.

'Kebabs?' I asked, with interest.

'Oh no – more exotic than kebabs! Fucking calamari for us girls, hey Vic?'

'Yeah, it was calamari, I remember,' murmured Vicki. 'You know, Michel's the type of john who gives me hope. He respects us, we respect him. He takes down some of the walls there are between us at the beginning. If only the others were more like him, if only the owners of these bed-show booths had even a touch of his kindness in their hearts. Things would be very different for us then. He may be a lonely man. He may be a man who can only go with prostitutes. But he is a better man than almost any other man I know. Because to us he is . . . how should I say it . . .? Yeah, I know now. To us, he is always very tender . . .'

Chapter Nine

Sexual Healing in Surbiton

Across town, a long way from tenderness, the ruin of Marina Studzinski lay all around her. It emanated from the chaos of her Surbiton front room like the tang of grease rising from a stack of unwashed plates. For Marina, then, even that short walk to the kitchen sink appeared too formidable a journey to face; and so the plates heaped up as one despairing meal out of a tin followed another.

You could recognize ruin too in the piles of unopened bills and in the clutter of upturned chairs and half-filled boxes of faded possessions. It was even more obviously at home within the drunk emptiness of the nine wine bottles strewn like skittles across the stained carpet.

Yet all this was nothing when set against the ruin which turned Marina's face into a rippling blend of twitches, frowns and hapless smiles. It was as if her heart had cracked open, letting loose every conceivable emotion which came with the realization that everything was irretrievably lost. She sat in the middle of the room, on an old East India tea-chest. Her arms and legs were crossed. She drew intently on a cigarette wedged into the right side of her mouth. Seemingly handless then, she only allowed her lips to shift the cigarette's position an inch or so after every other drag. The smoke curled out of the opposite corner of her mouth and drifted down through her nose. Her body remained remarkably still, virtually statuesque.

But Marina's face, that curiously dancing face of tics and

distortions, appeared to rejoice in its abandoned movement. Only the dark circles of sleeplessness beneath her eyes stayed constant. The bruise on her throat, which had previously been a storm-cloud shade of black, was tinged with mauve and with yellow, with rainbow colours. In the sky, or on canvas, those colours would have looked pretty; on Marina's throat they rose and fell with every breath she took and spoke only of the savagery of a man she had loved, a man against whom her front and back doors had to be buttressed with steel bars.

'It's all over now, baby,' she said as the cigarette burned down to the butt. 'That maniac Frankie will surely kill me soon. Anyway, that doesn't matter – the bailiffs have already come and gone. The house gets repossessed tomorrow. The business, my delicious "Angels Of Love", is finished. There's gonna be no more sexual healing round Surbiton any more and that, my baby, more than anything else, makes me sadder than words could ever say . . .'

Six months earlier, Marina and I had also faced each other across the wide expanse of her front room. Everything else was different, except that she called me 'baby' a lot then too and her face was similarly mobile. But that afternoon, during our first meeting, Marina had been in firm control of her animated facial muscles as she strung together a remarkable sequence of pouting and winking gestures which appeared as ironic as they were seductive. Those were her favourite 'Angel Of Love' expressions and she exchanged them with subtle alacrity.

She winked a lot at me while the other men in the room were favoured more with the pout. Marina was dressed in an outrageously tight red boiler-suit, with the gold zip down the front only being pulled up to what she had laughingly called 'nipple level', so that her cleavage was amply accentuated. Consequently, I was not completely sure what meaning resided within her wink. It may well have been a hip deconstruction of the age-old 'Madame' persona, a kind

of dazzling parody of how Marina was meant to act and look as both the founder and current proprietor of the 'Angels Of Love Escort Agency', located in the suburban surrealism of Surbiton. More probably, Marina was merely delighting in *The Observer*'s sympathetic interview with her the preceding Sunday. Apparently, my interest in 'Angels' underlined further her belief that widespread public recognition of her therapeutic sexual service was imminent. But deep down, I worried that Marina's thirst for publicity was encouraging her to actually give me the eye – in more ways than one. I wondered how the other men would feel, being deprived of the wink, especially when they were such long-standing 'Angels' clients and I was so obviously a non-paying newcomer.

But it didn't take long to realize that they, instead, were thrilled to be on the receiving end of her sultry pout. Even after who knows how many times they had visited this angelic house of love, the men around me exuded the personal certainty that she wanted each of their ambiguously hunky bodies, like she had never wanted anything before. Winking was clearly kids' stuff – the pout was the thing. The only problem was that none of the men seemed to notice the uniformity of Marina's pout. It was as if each man was thinking, 'She only has lips for *me*'.

And, boy, did those lips of hers move. When she wasn't pouting she was wetting her lips, purling them back into her teeth-gleaming smile and, more often than not, using them to talk – sometimes charmingly but, more usually, excitedly. It was only after some time that I realized her fevered activity indicated that she was as nervous as I was; for just as the experience of visiting an escort agency was strange to me, so this was only her second interview.

Yet Marina had gone to much trouble to make my first visit an illuminating one. Although I had been surprised when she had ushered me into a room full of men, of her most representative clients no less, I had also been heartened by this show of ingenuity. I'd gone to Surbiton expecting

to find Marina alone or, otherwise, surrounded by a draped house-full of the women who worked for her as 'escorts', as her 'Angels Of Love'.

That she had somehow managed instead to entice her clients 'out into the open' struck me as being a staggeringly original act in this otherwise strait-jacketed world. I began to look more closely at these men who had fallen so hard for Marina and her agency that they were willing to debunk prostitution's conventions of male subterfuge. From the way they all looked at her, with the exception of Frankie, her new live-in lover who had just swept in through the front door with a beery 'Hello all!' greeting, it was clear that the men were there purely in deference to the wishes of Marina.

Frankie slumped down on the then still plush, unstained carpet and instantly clocked me a knowing look followed by, believe it or not, a wink. The effect was catching and I found myself winking back, without knowing why, at both Marina and Frankie. The arrival of her 'real man' seemed to settle Marina and, pulling in her pout, she quietly tapped the side of her long-stemmed wine glass.

'Gentlemen, my dear friends,' she began earnestly, 'I want to thank all of you for coming today. I know what it means for each of you to come out in public as the favourite clients of ''Angels Of Love''.' Rather than placating the men, Marina's words had the opposite effect by reducing her four clients, gathered round her in a conspiratorial circle, to blushing schoolboy-like shoe-shuffling and throat-clearing. The full impact of what each of them was doing sank in and, inevitably, the sudden rush of accompanying fear forced them to all look doubtfully across the room as Marina began to introduce me as 'a writer of integrity, someone who is here to understand our agency world and to explain it to others'. Although her intention was to both flatter me and, in turn, soothe her worrisome clientele, her words only succeeded in troubling us all even further.

It is a mysterious law of life that no sooner are you described as being full of 'integrity' than, as the eyes of

people turn towards you to witness such principled behaviour for themselves, you break out into a shifty-eyed, collar-loosening rash of perspiring convulsions. As the doomed eyes of Marina's men lanced into me, I succumbed to that irrevocable rule. Beneath their gaze I seemed to metamorphose, Gregor Samsa-like, into what I was sure resembled an ulcerous *News Of The World* maggot, overflowing with Machiavellian plans to tear their guts out.

The men seemed to think so too, for they quickly averted their gaze to the more pleasant sight of Marina holding forth, her short, blonde hair bobbing expectantly with every sensually explicit sentence. She extolled the joys of 'liberated love-making' and the 'virtue of any sexual desire, no matter how depraved others might think it'. With us today, she confided, there was not only 'our writer of integrity', but some deeply sensitive men who were beginning to 'flower freely and beautifully as sexual beings'. They were no longer imprisoned by their desire; rather, they were starting to free those very same yearnings. They were ready to be dominated and devoured by women, to be whipped and flogged; they were no longer afraid to wear women's clothes or to release the most primal urges within themselves; they were so free that they could find beauty and joy in almost anything. Why, said Marina with almost cooing delight, there was even one man here unselfish and imaginative enough to desire the pleasuring of Goldie. Apparently this yearning still had to be fulfilled as Goldie himself had yet to be convinced of the allure of the man's proposal.

Goldie, a remarkably sane Golden Labrador, was at that very moment out in the back garden barking cheerfully at the next door neighbour's cat. It was difficult then not to marvel at the dog's sensible approach to life. Marina, meanwhile, pushed on down her emancipatory path of sexual passion although the attention of her audience had wandered to the more consuming thought of who amongst us was the aspiring Goldie-lover. Being new to this particular

kind of erotic craving I struggled to identify the culprit for they all seemed to be fine gentlemen from, as Marina confirmed, the worlds of high finance, management consultancy, publishing and advertising.

As if keen to re-establish their otherwise impeccable credentials, the men began slowly to enter the conversation. Talk shifted curiously from bestiality to the pressures of tight business schedules, Picasso's 'Blue Period', the delights of a fine cheese-fondue dinner and late Victorian literature. The sub-text to this startling change of subject-matter was clear. Everyone was determined to prove himself to be both a responsible and cultured citizen rather than a sexual deviant. In the world outside this Surbiton front-room, these men were undoubtedly used to fawning respect; it was poignant to see them trying desperately to reaffirm their sense of decency and worth. But Goldie, reliable old barking Goldie, kept the pathos of the situation in check.

Frankie, of course, paid no attention to any of this but kept on giving me his laddish wink. Eventually he sidled over to me when the other men were diverted by a sudden interjection from Marina and hissed, 'You and me seem to be the only ones who don't have to pay for it round here, hey matey?' Luckily, Marina had just announced the arrival of some of the 'Angels' and Frankie and I were both distracted by the wash of silk and perfume flowing into the front room. Deborah, Gemma and Gillian, Marina's three closest 'Angels', swirled round the room, smiling, murmuring throaty 'Hellos' and kissing all of us lightly on our cheeks.

In the adjoining dining room, Marina had spread out an elaborate buffet, complemented by chilled bottles of white wine. As the drink flowed we loosened up and, in Marina's word, 'mingled'. The others even appeared to have forgotten the burning question relating to the identity of Goldie's unrequited lover.

The men had been given anonymous names for the night

by Marina. She called her two shorter clients 'Bill' and 'Bob' while their thinner, more elegant counterparts were tagged 'Claude' and 'Clive'. They were as much strangers to each other as they were to me. But somehow they began to open up and talk as if they had all known each other for a very long time.

The bizarre nature of their conversation deepened as they finally began to discuss male attitudes to prostitution over the last of the salmon and mushroom vol-au-vents and the rapidly sinking bottles of wine. Goldie still gambolled tantalisingly outside, amidst the shadows stretching across Marina's manicured lawn.

Both 'Claude' and 'Clive', firm chums now, refuted the notion that there was some kind of hypocrisy behind the fact that all four of them were married and yet still amongst Marina's most regular clients. 'You're very young, my boy,' 'Claude' pointed out helpfully, 'and so what seems contradictory to you now has much to do with youthful idealism. When you get older you'll find out that, fortunately, women are not made like us, they have different desires. Their sexual needs fade with the years. A woman of my age, the right side of fifty, does not retain the same urge I have for a full and varied sex life.'

Claude was depressing me and I looked over sympathetically at Goldie for I thought I knew what the old bounder meant when he said 'varied'. But then 'Bill' went and spoilt it all, just when I had begun to admire his stolid restraint, by backing 'Claude' to the hilt. 'It's not that we love our wives any less, it's just that we need a little bit of sexual stimulus on the side. This can keep the marriage on an even keel rather than destroy it.'

When I inquired whether the same process of equilibrium applied if the woman in the marriage fancied some 'stimulus on the side', a stunned silence was soon engulfed by a barrage of guffaws. They assured me that I had a lot to learn for this idea, at least in their marriages, was 'quite ludicrous'. I was shepherded over, in my innocent lamb

guise, to the more sharp-witted company of Gemma and Gillian.

They were both in their late twenties, former 'office administrators' who had become disenchanted with the ceaseless innuendo and creeping sexual harassment of their day-to-day working lives in London. Three years ago they had answered an 'Escort Agency' advert together and, after a bewildering first few weeks of prostitution work, had settled into the work. Although careful to remain diplomatic while within earshot of the men and of Marina, Gemma and Gillian became less enthusiastic about agency work and especially their clients whenever a sudden burst of laughter from the others muffled the candour of their words.

But even in their disenchantment there was a bottom-line. 'It's Money, spelt with capital fucking M,' whispered Gemma. 'You quickly get used to the money because, after working in a nine-to-five office job, it's fantastic. I earn as much in a day as I used to in a week. And once it's in my hand I find I spend it -- on clothes, on books, on holidays. I'm not wild about any of the men, and I get bored with them quickly, but to go back to my old life now would be almost impossible.'

Gillian provided a more subtle distinction: 'In our old lives we seemed to be so much more subservient to men. That might sound strange at first because the initial idea everyone has about prostitution is that the woman is exploited, she is the one being dominated. But I feel so much more in control here, in this environment, where I'm more in charge, where the men even want me to boss them around, than in a more conventional setting. To go back to that old office-politicking and sexual game-playing would be hard. But, sure, there are many, many times round here when it gets pretty distressing as well. Some days, some guy's sexual kink no longer seems mildly amusing and you just feel sick of it all . . .'

Bang on cue, 'Claude' wafted over, his fat face wreathed in ingratiating smiles. With a slight squeeze of Gemma's

hand he asked if I had learnt anything new about women since we had last spoken. I was by now drunk enough to want to sneer back some pithy 'You sick old fuck, Goldie will *never* give in to you' one-liner. But I was also still sufficiently alert to see Marina waving girlishly across the room at me, in an affecting 'Are you having a good time, baby?' kind of way. I waved back and smiled pleasantly, if hopefully mysteriously, at 'Claude'.

Marina was over in a flash for, as she said, she and I had to get down to some serious interviewing while the two 'Angels' had 'dates' in the next hour. The four men were issued with my telephone number and an instruction from Marina that they were all to call me so that I could interview each of them personally. Once more she assured them of their anonymity and my integrity. This time, with the wine zinging through me, I felt myself subvert the norm. As they each pumped my hand I was sure that I had never looked more ethical or trustworthy. Even 'Claude' assured me that we would arrange a meeting.

Frankie, who seemed to become more menacingly sober with each beer he drank, led the men out into the night – he was taking them drinking and it was no secret that he wouldn't be paying. With dewy-eyed devotion, Marina watched him leave. 'Isn't he a love?' she murmured. Gemma and Gillian looked stonily back at her while I once again attempted my ambiguous shrug and smile routine.

With a promise that they would also keep in touch, the two 'Angels' disappeared into the back of a cab whisking them to the other side of London, to Hampstead and to St John's Wood – to work. Deborah, an ex-nurse in her early forties, was already answering the 'Angel Of Love' hotline which seemed to ring with increasing regularity as the hours slipped by and the night deepened.

Every twenty minutes or so, Deborah would call Marina to the phone so that she could take a call from an established client personally. Always, without fail, her greeting rang out with the words said in the very same sequence and with the

same pitch of bubbling sincerity. 'Well, surprise, surprise! Hello, my baby. How're we doing? Mmmmhmmm, but I can tell, baby, you'd like some *randy* company tonight . . .' Of course she was always right and after explaining that she herself would not be available for a few hours, winking coyly at me, she then proceeded to list a whole stream of alternative 'beautiful and randy young ladies' – breasty blondes, leggy brunettes, sensual Swedes, English roses, Turkish delights, matronly nurses, young secretaries, school teachers, university students, bisexual double-acts, single masturbating girls who were just dying to be watched . . .

Whatever the type of 'Angel' wanted, Marina said coyly, their price of heaven started with an agency introductory fee of £50. The remainder of the cost would have to be negotiated with the girl he chose. Once the caller had decided which 'Angel' should visit him at his home or hotel, Deborah would telephone the escort and, usually, her conversation would begin with a 'Hi, it's me. Listen, we've got a bit of a strange one for you but he sounds keen and the money should be good' preamble. The man's telephone number would be read out and then it was down to the woman to contact him and set up a 'date', usually within the hour.

As the telephone chirruped incessantly, with Deborah answering it unstintingly in her sexiest 'Hi, this is "Angels" – can I help you?' voice, I said to Marina that it seemed that she had hit on a booming kind of business. 'Oh, it is much more than that, my baby!' she crooned as she led me towards the privacy of the kitchen and another bottle of wine which would surely help us get our interview going at last. 'Did you hear what Deborah said? – "Can I *help* you?" I insist she says that to every caller. I'm not in this just to make money, baby, I'm here to help men, to offer them therapy. This is a place of *sexual healing*, my angel . . .'

Like Sara Dale, whom she strove to emulate, Marina's desire to heal was essentially bound up in her need to confront

damage which had already been done. The common perception of prostitutes is that such damage has, in some way, been done to them and it is this which leads them to their seemingly ruinous 'sex for sale' way of life. While stressing that such generalisations wrongly assume that prostitution ruins people even further, Marina believed that embryonic hurt was often the most decisive factor in shaping people's lives.

'To do this work well you have to know about abuse and about the pain it brings. Yes, my baby, you have to have had a little damage done to you. There are some women who have always been protected, always been loved, and they do not become prostitutes. They would have difficulty in understanding the angry and fearful lust of men. But when such a man has stood over you when you are young you know these things, you are different to those luckier women.

'I was damaged but, baby, I believe that scars do heal. And this work here, at "Angels", is about healing – for we, all us "Angels", are here to help and to heal men of the damage that they have done to us and that society has also done to them.'

Marina, naturally, was more comfortable churning out nebulous paeans to sexual healing than in discussing her own hurt. However, after much obscure warbling, she returned sharply to the subject when describing her move from Poland to Sweden in the mid-1960s. 'It was around 1966 and I was about twelve years of age. My father died when I was much younger and things had been very bad for my mother and me in Warsaw. We were often struggling to just survive. My mother's brother had been transferred to Stockholm a few years previously – he was some sort of diplomat and he managed to arrange that we could join him in Sweden for a short holiday that summer. He paid for us to come over and even though I did not know it at the time, the intention was always that we would stay with him and his wife and not return to Poland. Of course, I was very

excited and I quickly started to learn Swedish and to attend a local school.

'I was very grateful to my uncle and when he began to show me special attention, you know, doing little things like stroking my legs and giving me little kisses when we were alone together, I felt I couldn't say anything to my mother. He had been so kind to us so it was very hard for me to imagine that he would do anything wrong.

'One Sunday afternoon, still in the summer, he asked me to go with him for a drive into the countryside. After a while he pulls over into the woods and he takes out his penis which by now is very hard and, for me, you know, a little girl, very frightening to look at. He made me touch him and when he came it was all over my dress. I was very disturbed by this but, more than anything else, I was confused. So it was almost a relief when he told me exactly what I must do. We went down to the stream to wash my dress and then, while it was drying on a rock in the sun, he made me take off my underwear. Then he raped me.

'Up until then it had been an embarrassing experience. I had been afraid, but I would be lying if I did not say that I also felt the first stirrings of sexuality in me. I had seen the power I had when I touched his penis and made it jump! But of course he was the one in power. He proved this when he raped me. He hurt me terribly. I went into shock. I could hardly speak for days afterwards, even when my mother asked me what was wrong. My uncle had told me that my mother would have to go back alone to Poland if I told her what "we did". What could I do? I kept quiet and it never happened again. I think that his wife maybe guessed what happened for he never touched me again. It was very strange for then he treated me like an "ordinary" uncle. I hated him but I was also relieved that it had ended.'

Marina's resilience was such that she then enjoyed what she describes as a 'healthily promiscuous' teenage sex-life with boys her own age. However, she was raped again, in her early-twenties. After she had fallen awkwardly in a

Stockholm street she was dazedly helped to the near-by flat of a passer-by who promised to treat her cuts. Instead, he kept her prisoner there for the next twenty-odd hours, during which time he raped her repeatedly.

While not dismissing the damage that rape inflicts, Marina refused to draw any links between those grim episodes of sexual violence in her life and the catastrophic upheaval which finally drove her towards prostitution. Increasingly insecure after the second rape, Marina moved to Amsterdam where she met an Englishman whom she married little more than a month later. When she returned with him to England the marriage quickly went sour and, after a few months, he forced her out of his flat.

'I had no money, I had no friends, I had nothing. I was desperate. Either I must kill myself or else I must do something fast to get out of this mess I am in. I had seen this advert in the local paper a few weeks before. It was an escort agency in North London and they were advertising for new girls. I phoned and that same afternoon I had my interview with the agency owner. He was an Indian and soon after I had gone into his office he told me to take my clothes off and then he fucked me. He said that this was a test all the girls had to take. I didn't like him at all but I knew that I had to do it if I wanted a job. Soon after we finished he tells me that there's a special client of his at The Dorchester – an Arab sheik who I must go see.

'I feel like I've just been raped and now I have to go do it all over again. I hardly have time for a shower. I walk into The Dorchester and I feel terrible. I can hardly face it. And my heart sinks when I walk into the Arab's suite. He's a really fat and ugly man and I prepare myself for the worst. But that was when I learnt that preconceptions in this business are useless. He must have quickly guessed the situation for he was charming. I spent maybe four hours with him and I told him everything. He ordered wonderful food and then he gave me £300 and told me to take care of myself. When I said, "But we haven't even had sex –

you don't need to pay me," he laughed and said that I would learn that this business was not just about fucking. I had given him pleasure just by talking to him and he felt it was not "appropriate" that I should have to have sex after all that had happened to me that day. I was really lucky to have him as my first client. It also made me understand that prostitution can be a good thing, a kind of therapy. That man helped me that first time and since then I have helped many men.'

With this almost naïvely 'helpful' attitude to her clients, Marina soon established herself as the agency's most popular escort. Her open-minded willingness to listen to the men's wildest sexual fantasies, and usually go as far as she could to fulfilling them, was accompanied by her steadfast 'Are you having a good time, baby?' banter. Marina also got on well with most of the women escorts whose spasms of envy at her money-spinning success were quickly blunted by their liking for her wit and optimism.

When the agency owner was jailed a year later for his simultaneous involvement in a drug-smuggling ring, it did not take Marina long to decide that she would set up her own business. 'I had all these clients and, also, all the girls I had worked with were then no longer with an agency so it seemed a natural thing to do to open up "Angels". First I went out and bought this house, here in lovely Surbiton. This means a massive mortgage repayment for me to make every month but I am more interested in creating the right kind of atmosphere for an agency like "Angels".

'I chose to move to Surbiton because I wanted to be close to London without being in the city itself. Also I thought the police wouldn't be too tough on agencies out here. So we were under way within a few months of the other agency closing down. All my old clients stayed with us and we now have about thirty girls on the books. I interview every one of them and I make sure that they are nice girls who understand my policy of sexual healing.

'Basically, my philosophy is that we should not try to bury

our fantasies. It's far better to bring them out into the open. That, of course, is not the British way. Here people repress their sexual desires so they come out all twisted. It is far better to listen to what the men want and then to try to help them release themselves from these fantasies. Maybe the other women are not quite as committed as I am to these ideals but then I see myself, like Sara Dale, as being a kind of sexual therapist rather than a prostitute. This is not meant to be just about profit for me – it is about helping to heal the men and, also, to heal the pain that has been done to my "Angels" in the past . . .'

As her telephone manner implied, Marina took great pride in her diversity of 'Angels'. Apart from more blatant sexual distinctions, the escorts were also differentiated by age, class and colour. The youngest of Marina's 'Angels' was a seventeen-year-old Arab girl, Sharma, whom Jackie would have loved to have met as she came from Fez, in Morocco. Her mother, Rosetta, also worked for Marina as a prostitute. But as the helplessly youthful Sharma became more popular, Rosetta began to cut back on her own work and act instead as a perverse kind of maternal manager, pimping her daughter from one trick to the next. Loath to pay Marina the standard £50 agency fee every time Sharma 'did business', Rosetta began to give out her family telephone number to more and more men and, eventually, she was running her own one daughter agency.

In contrast to Sharma, in virtually every way imaginable, 'Mrs Spinks' was Marina's least solicited escort. She was seventy-nine years old when she phoned Marina and asked her if she could work as an 'Angel'. Her husband had died nine months previously, after a marriage of nearly fifty years. They had had a serene half-century together and when he died Mary Spinks was devastated. During their retirement years, they had collected coloured bottles of glass. This seemingly pointless hobby assumed grotesque meaning for Mary Spinks in the most grievous months following her

husband's death. Shutting herself away from the world she spent six months alone, smashing their collection of coloured, bottled glass and then pasting the shattered fragments all over the walls and ceilings of their cottagey home in Dulwich.

To walk into that house at night, with candles burning so that their light fell magically across the coloured glass lining every room, was an experience that money could never buy. But it was Marina rather than any man who paid money to her; money to keep her alive for, as an 'Angel', Mary Spinks said, she still had something worth living for. The gentle kind of madness in her was not sufficient for her to be institutionalised but, especially with her old age, it hardly constituted the ideal scenario for escort agency work.

'What could I do?' sighed Marina. 'She phones me up out of the blue and when I see her heart-breakingly beautiful home I will do anything to help this woman. Now when men say that they want an older woman they still get frightened if I say I have a seventy-nine-year-old waiting for you. So what I do is I send her money every week and say that the men had to cancel their appointments at the last moment for business reasons so she still gets her fee. She laughs like a young girl then and says she understands. She has obviously never had one client in her whole life but, to me, she is still one of my most special "Angels".'

For Gillian, this was 'a typical Marina-kind of thing to do. It's wonderfully kind and that's Marina. She's a very sweet woman and so hurt people always flock to her. But in this business you have to look after yourself first because, otherwise, it will just ruin you, it will destroy you. And then what good are you to anyone? This is the trouble with Marina – she so needs to help others that she forgets that this is the most unhelpful thing she could do to herself.

'I know I sound terribly hard but beneath all her "bubbly personality" bullshit, Marina is really fucked up. You can see it in the way this business of hers operates. It's shambolic, mainly because Marina spends too much time

listening to that creep "Claude" begging to be allowed to fuck Goldie. Meanwhile, she's being ripped off left, right and centre – by the men and by the girls. If a man says to her he only has £80 with him instead of the required £120 she'll say, "OK, pay me next time." Fuck, man, that goes against every basic rule in this business. You never drop your price for these fuckers.

'Well, you could say that's her business but we're effectively employed by her and what she does affects us. Even worse, she'll do something like anal sex and will hardly charge anything more. It's crazy – especially when you think of AIDS. I've lost a lot of regulars because either I won't do anal sex or else I drop them because I know she had already done it with them. I'm not gonna die because of her sexual healing bullshit!

'I'm only in this business for another year or two – tops. So far I've saved £20,000 which I keep in a high-interest account. I reckon I need forty grand and then I'll be free. I won't need to do work I hate any more, either in an office or in the bedroom. So I keep very much on the straight and narrow. I do my thing but I know how fucked the world is and I know I can't heal it. I'm not Marina, thank God!

'Maybe if things had turned out differently for her when she was younger she would have been someone really special. But as a prostitute she's hopelessly misguided. Sure, this made her wildly popular when she first started out but the men aren't fools – the sensible ones soon move away from her because they know that she takes risks. So she just gets the anal specialists and the dog-fucking creeps and she thinks she's Mother fucking Theresa on some kind of healing mission from God.

'But all the time she's getting deeper into debt. I'm one of the few girls who still pays her the £50 agency fee. I've seen the rest of them – even Gemma, you know – they just keep the money for themselves. And if she does ask, they just say, "Next time, Marina, next time, I promise." And she says, "OK, my baby, don't you forget now, my

baby . . .'' Of course, she's the one who forgets and she'll never listen to me when I try to reason with her. I can't imagine how she manages to pay her mortgage every month especially with that fucker Frankie scrounging every pound she makes for himself. And the police do nothing when he beats her up – to them she's not an angelic sex-therapist, she's just a prostitute who's lucky they're not shutting her business down. It's little wonder that she's drinking so heavily . . . she can only go one way now and that's down, all the way down to very bottom.'

That scathing indictment of Marina's deluded business sense, which encouraged her to think in almost mystical 'Angel' terms rather than with more hard-headed 'Agency' practicality, was borne out in later months by the clients themselves. Even the doggedly deceitful 'Claude' admitted that he stopped paying Marina for her services despite his own business investments amounting to more than a million pounds.

'It no longer felt fitting to think of her as a prostitute, my dear boy,' burbled 'Claude'. 'She was much more than that; she had become a very dear and trusted friend. I would listen to her troubles, she would listen to mine. It was give and take, real friendship. Money didn't come into it any more.'

Aside from this gullibility, Marina's fatal flaw as a prostitute was her inability to separate her personal life from the ingrained impersonality of prostitution. Ironically she was ruined by her failure to deaden herself to others. She listened to them, she believed them, she thought she could help them. Inevitably, she found herself falling in love with some of her clients, the best of whom, as she now concurs, was Roger, an earnest builder from Bow in East London.

'I first started to go to escort agencies the year after I got divorced,' Roger explained. 'Marina was one of the first prostitutes I slept with. Really, there was no-one else like her. She was terrific in bed, she really made you feel special

and, even stranger for a prostitute, you also got the feeling that she was getting pleasure from you. That's what made me think of her as a woman, rather than just as a "prostitute". She liked me, I think, because I wasn't married or anything. So we started to see each other regularly and she refused to take money from me any more. I was pleased about that – not because I was saving my dosh but because it made me feel that we really were lovers.

'As I found myself falling more and more in love with her I begged her to stop the agency work. I couldn't bear the thought of her being with other men, especially the type of perverts who used to turn up on her doorstep. But she wouldn't stop, or she just couldn't. She went on that whole "sexual therapy" malarkey. What could I do? I said, "It's either me or them." She said they needed her help more than I did. Now I would have understood it if she was making piles of money off these other blokes but they were just ripping her off. Financially speaking, she would probably have been much better off living with me. But it wasn't to be.

'I was shattered for months afterwards but then I pulled myself together. I see Gillian now – she left "Angels" just before the crash. She works at this other agency round Surbiton way. Different set-up altogether. Business all the way. That's how it is with me and Gillian. There's no real lovey-dovey stuff between us. She's not out to heal me or anything. Anyway, I reckon she knows that I'm basically a pretty together sort of guy. I just can't be bothered trying to pull someone down the pub. This is more upfront. But I also do respect her and Gill and I have a sad kind of laugh now and then about Marina and the "Angels Of Love". Despite ourselves we still really miss her, you know . . .'

Lost within anguished cycles of violence and debt, Marina Studzinski began to crumble a few months after our first meeting. As her 'Angels Of Love' dream slowly disintegrated beneath the relentless demands of her building society and the similarly percussive pressure administered to her face

and body by the drunkenly psychotic Frankie, Marina slipped away into the most personal kind of ruin.

She could have saved her house and herself from physical harm by changing, by taking the money she rightfully earned as a prostitute and by forcing Frankie out of her life. Yet Marina was lost in far deeper ruin, within the morass of illusion that had set into her head like the subsidence which began to sink Mary Spinks' beautiful home of coloured glass.

It's uncertain exactly when Marina's own collapse originated but the mazy patterns of brutality and sex running through her life pull one inexorably back to that Sunday afternoon in Sweden with her dress drying on a rock in the summer sunshine, to that moment when she was first raped. It can be said that millions of other women have been subjected to the potentially ruining terror of rape and yet have not followed the path taken by Marina Studzinski. 'But who can really tell,' Marina herself asked that final afternoon in her lost Surbiton front room, 'what drives one woman one way and another a different way? All I know is that I had this dream, to be a sexual healer. I thought I could change people and even now I still believe that I did that. It wasn't all about my "Angels" deserting me without paying me or the debt-collectors banging on the door or Frankie hitting me again and again or me getting drunk night after night. No, no, my baby, it was about something better than all that.

'I remember one day this man came to the door. He was a postman, maybe thirty-five years old. So painfully shy he made even me want to curl up with embarrassment. I spent one whole day with this man. He is broken. He has never even been able to look at a woman, much less hold her. Slowly, he begins to become a little more confident. It's beautiful to me. He holds my hand and then an hour later we kiss and then two hours later we make love. He was crying all the time – with relief, with joy, he said. He never knew it could feel this good. We did it again and then once

more. I told him not to pay me – you should not pay on your first time. Sure, it was bad business sense but, my baby, I was like a fucking angel that day – who can put a price on that sort of healing? Only ruin can be measured by money, by how much you have lost . . .'

Yet even ruin cannot really be quantified. How do you measure the inward debt occurring when Marina Studzinski's face falls into those powerless ripples of twitches and frowns? How certain can you be that the ruin has been washed away forever now that Frankie is in jail and she lives as an 'ordinary one-man woman' with one of her former clients, with 'no chance' of ever returning to her dream of sexual healing? She is cared for, she has as much money as she needs but, as she says, 'I have lost something, I know that I will now never be a sexual healer. That dream is gone, it is ruined. What can I do, my baby, what can I do? That sadness will still not leave me . . .'

Chapter Ten

Money Pumping

During those same winter nights, while 'Angels' slowly turned to ashes, a different kind of vision burned brightly across the city. Far from the suburban backstreets of Surbiton, beyond the ethereal dreams of sexual healing, Howard Lambert's money-spinning fantasy burst into radiant reality every night of the week.

I remember, in the last weeks of Marina Studzinski's agency-decline, making that ponderous journey across the frozen wastes of London from Surbiton to Highgate. No matter how many times I subjected myself to that interminable trek, to the bleak waiting for cancelled trains and the sourly sighing delays in darkened tunnels, each new journey became worse than the last. And when I'd finally make it to the end of the line, only one thing stopped me from making a last wrist-opening walk into the cemetery-centred woods of Highgate; the realization that I had travelled in the 'right' direction, from ruin to fulfilment, from chaos to clarity, from 'Angels' to 'Pumps'. I resolved never to make that particular journey in the opposite direction, from Howard Lambert to Marina Studzinski, for the contrast would have been unbearable.

Yet, even as I was being swept along the Turkish-carpeted hallways of Howard's unmortgaged home, it was hard not to think of Marina; not to fear that before the night was through Frankie might leave her face swollen and streaked with colour again. The tragedy in that thought would

invariably coalesce with the music I'd hear billowing through the house, growing ever louder as we neared the room where Howard worked the phones. I soon learnt to recognize those sounds, that music of beautiful ruin, for Howard would be 'on another Mahler and Schubert binge'. When the theme from *Death in Venice* – or Mahler's *Fifth*, as Howard sniffily informed me – echoed down those long passages I found myself seeing the absurdly young face of the boy leading me through the house dissolving into that of Marina. At other times, Schubert's forlorn *Die Winterreise* would wear us down until we reached the heavy oak door which the boy swung open. With a smile he would disappear into the unknown reaches of the house – where I never saw him again until the next time I arrived at Howard's front door.

Inside Howard's room, the surrounding blackness was broken only by the steadily climbing red light of the amplifier and, more sporadically, by the flashing beacon on top of the telephone. Howard's eyes must have stayed open in the dark for whenever the telephone sparkled he would instantly whirl his revolving chair round, swing his feet back onto the desk, lower the volume of the music with his slim remote-control stick, lift the phone from its blinking cradle and say those words he must have said a million times.

'Yeah, this is "Pumps" and my name's Howard. What can I do for you?'

He said these words naturally, as if this was what he would say even if the voice on the other end of the phone belonged to his mother. Even the 'yeah', a word which can give in all too easily to contempt or lethargy when used as the very first in a telephone conversation, fell from his lips with brightness, a 'yeaarhhh!' sort of oomph, which shone naturally from him. In a room so dark, this flaring liveliness felt all the stranger when the call ended. Still in the blackness, Howard would half-turn to me as if continuing a briefly interrupted conversation of our own. He'd say something over his shoulder like, 'Fuck, kid, didn't this guy come up with the music to end all music? You can even hear it in

his titles – *Frozen Tears, Loneliness, Last Hope, Deception, Numbness* – it's all here, boy!' And before I could ever think of an adequate reply he would lift his legs from the table, skirt round a semi-circle in his chair and send the red light on his sound system spiralling up into the highest reaches of the small display window. As a desolate tenor rolled out into the night, Howard would motion me to sit on a settee in full striking distance of the huge speakers pounding out Franz Schubert's *Winter's Journey*. We'd sit there silently, Howard and I, face to face in the dark, with me thinking that Franzie himself must have made the grim equivalent of a few British Rail Surbiton-to-Highgate winter journeys to have written music this sad.

Eventually, the flickering phone would set the whole whirling, foot-lifting, volume-tweaking process in motion again. Then, and only then, as if it were a prerequisite that we shared those opening moments of musical intimacy, Howard would stretch out his hand to shake mine. With an almost touching seriousness he would ask, 'So, how are you, kid?' And no matter how often I reduced my answer to a flippant 'Fine', he would nod gravely and say how pleased he was to hear this supposedly significant news. When his turn came to reply to the same question he would almost always gently raise the level of the music a couple of notches and, with the slabs of jowly flesh on his face splitting open into a wide grin, say, 'Things are pumping here, boy, they're *really* pumping!'

Whenever I visited Howard's house I felt that pump; it was there in the music, especially when he swapped Mahler and Schubert for The Gap Band and Funkadelic, when *Death In Venice* and *Winterreise* faded into the massive blocks of funk pumped out on *Burn Rubber On Me* and *Work That Sucker To Death*. It was there even when the volume was turned down, for then you would hear the phones ringing, almost pumping with desire, as one caller after another phoned the best gay escort agency in town. As much as this was a house overflowing with music and

ringing phones, it was also a place full of men – the men, some of them trying to look more like boys, who worked for Howard; and their wayward friends.

Unless it was very late at night, they were always popping by, to drop off or to pick up some money. While they were there they'd chill out for a few hours. A couple of them would even take turns manning the phones so that Howard could take a break. Every now and then a job would turn up for someone who had to be reluctantly prised away from finding out the extent to which the house was well-stocked with food and drink that specific week. Yet, even though they were free to help themselves to more than the odd snack, the circle of escorts and hip hangers-on never appeared to take Howard's generosity beyond the limits he himself had set. It was as if they were dwarfed by his presence in that house of music and phones. Although he was not a particularly tall man, there was an assured solidity about everything he did. This, coupled with his singular kind of commanding warmth, encouraged the pumping boys to show due deference to his hospitality. There was never any other feeling than that this was Howard's place, that you were lucky to be in his 'Pumps' space.

For, if they fucked up, they knew they were out; they knew that there was a queue of boys ready to take their slot. One night, when we were in his room at the back of the house where Howard liked to listen to classical music and take the last few hours of calls, I asked him about his apparent altruism.

With a smile that suddenly glinted with the steel beneath his big open face, he said simply that, 'They're welcome here, they know that. I'm happy for them to come round. They're my boys, they're the guys that make this agency. And I like to see them, to hear how they're doing, it keeps us in touch. It's what makes it a rare kind of agency, it's what makes it the best. They can bring their friends with them, they can have a drink, a meal even, watch a video, whatever. But they know, if they let me down then they're

out. They'll be lucky to get away with it once. Twice – and they're finished. They know the score – they don't fuck me around, I don't fuck them around. I show them plenty respect, they do the same back to me. It works beautifully.'

'Always?'

'Well, kid, always is a lying word. I won't even say "nearly always". But, I'd say, "most of the time". Most of the time it runs as smoothly as heated butter. Especially when things really get pumping 'cos when they do, when all three phones are ringing and we're laying down a beat in the background, then I'm away. I'm cooking, I'm funking, I'm steaming and I'm bringing guys together one after another. I get a call from a client in Hampstead – he wants a rough, young blue-eyed skinhead. On phone two we've got an out-of-towner, say an American, who wants to go out for a show and a meal and then finish with an all-nighter in his room at the Sheraton in Knightsbridge. Phone number three's ringing with a guy in Richmond who's looking for a hunk who specializes in water-sports. The two calls before that were for an escort who both gives and takes oral and for another who'll turn up as one of the Village People, say the construction-gear guy. This sort of stuff happens some nights. Bang! Bang! Bang! You've got to deliver even though you're being kinda stretched in all these different directions.

'Now, in the busy periods, I've usually got one other guy manning the phones with me. On weekend nights I work with someone experienced, someone who knows the ropes. But maybe he's the one hunk I have who's an ace water-sports specialist. So I gotta make the decision – does he take an hour or two away from the phone and go do the job in Richmond? Yeah, course he does! Off he goes with a litre of Evian. He's gonna have to drink that on his way there so that he'll be ready to shoot some yellows all over this guy in Richmond.

'So there I am then, working on my own, and I love it. I get dialling my boys in between client calls – I have all

the info I need in my head. I know which guy's right for which client. I put them together and I get a £25 agency fee. The escort makes three, four times that amount if he's any good. And, before I even know it, I've got all five clients booked up. But, then, if someone fucks up, if they let the client down, if they don't show, then they know it's over. If they can't make it that night – they just *gotta* tell me, give me a little warning a few hours before. "I'm not gonna make it tonight, Howard." That's all they gotta say. I say, "Fine kid, no problem. I'll call you tomorrow." But if they jive with me, if they fuck with this agency, then it's bye-bye forever. So everyone understands how things work round here and so everyone's happy with the agency – me, the boys and the clients. But, as you asked no, I guess, not always, it can *never* be always! But we're doing beautifully, we're pumping, most of the time.'

Howard's Americanisms, his 'pumping' and 'funking' and 'jiving' adjectives, the way he said things like 'How are you, kid!' and 'See you, kid!' appeared quaintly eccentric. This was not because he had yet to lose his Merseyside accent, despite having lived for the last thirty of his forty-nine years in London. Rather, there was something outlandish about the way he mixed his American radio-jock style with his sombre *Winterreise* and Mahler symphonies; something fascinating in the way his broad potato-field of a face cracked open beneath a great big flash of a smile and a deep 'We're pumping now, kid!' rumble.

Howard was not a handsome man; but he knew that he had a face more interesting than most. The clues his face gave to the contrasting shades flitting across his inner life were even more intriguing. His face, while not fat, was unusually packed with compact flesh. But his features – the eyebrows, the eyes, the nose, the mouth and the lines of years – created all kinds of chunks and crevices. Whatever the light, parts of his face always seemed to rest beneath some small shadow. And, for all his 'pumping' and *Work That Sucker To Death* exhortations, something more

shadowy was at sail inside him. For when the house had emptied of everyone but that apparently invisible boy who always opened the door to me, that's when the lights went out and Howard listened to his own music so loudly that he had to watch for the light on top of the phone.

That was the time when I most liked to visit him. Earlier than that, amid all the freneticism of the house, the flipside emerged in a kind of authoritative barking at his boys. He was continually telling them to 'get pumping' and that they should, without any underlying irony, get their 'arses in gear!' Of course that inevitably set off all kinds of raucous ribaldry and gave Howard the chance to sneak away to his phones. But, in those later hours, he was more ready to talk. Again his courtesy filtered through, for if it hadn't been for my presence he would have had all that time to himself and to Mahler or Schubert. There was no doubting how precious he found those moments alone; but he never once avoided seeing me at that late hour.

However, there was still that familiar shade beneath the politeness, the silt of his inoffensive ambivalence. No matter how tired he looked, no matter how comfortable we became during those musical sessions, he shielded himself deftly from too clear-sighted an exposure. There was always an impenetrable netting of gauze round his past, covering the life that was his own. I never pushed too hard at that protection for, early on, he said, 'We've all got a right to a secret history'; and instead of making me suspect any shady dealings in the unstated way that he had found the money to put down cash for this house in Highgate, I felt inclined to step back. That 'secret history' seemed more likely to contain private pain than public scandal.

All he would tell me about his past was that he was from Birkenhead, had always known he was gay and had worked in clubs as a DJ, promoter and manager — none of which came as much of a surprise after even the shortest stretch of time in his company. Instead, he wanted to talk about his current life — which meant 'Pumps'.

'Look, kid,' he'd say, '*this* is my fucking life. This is the only interesting thing about me – the way I keep this business cooking month after month, year in, year out, even riding out the worst fucking recession in years like we're just skimming steam off the surface. You'll find this out about me, kid. This is who I am. This house, this agency, that'll tell you everything you need to know.'

As I wasn't sure what it was I 'needed to know', I told Howard instead about Marina and her 'Angels' fiasco. He already knew part of the story, the better half, for he had also read *The Observer* feature when there was still hope that her agency would be saved. But as her illusions unfolded before him he said, 'Fuck, this is terrible, kid, it's fucking heartbreaking', with that face of his clouding in sympathy. We already knew that it was too late to bring Marina over to the 'Pumps' HQ to see how an agency could be run slickly and with an affinity for the escorts and the clients, even when the services got down to basic W/S, S&M and CP brass tacks.

'It's a heart-crushing pity, kid, I'm telling you – a real waste. Now I know she's at heart a much better person than me – by some way, I'd say – but in this business you got to use your head much more than your heart. I call this place "Pumps" not just 'cos of the sexual connotations and not because it's a lonely hearts club. It's "Pumps" for me 'cos it gives me the oxygen, that clarity in the head you need to stay on top of all the shit that can go down in an escort agency. You get shitty clients if you're not careful, you get cheating and lying escorts if you don't act the right way with them. You can't just trust, not in this world. All you gotta keep doing, over and over, is *think*! It sounds like this Marina girl just left everything to the heart and that's what's so tragic. Maybe the flaw, deep down, is more in us than her. She trusts blindly; we think cynically.

' 'Cos look, kid, and you know this probably better than I do by now, with prostitution everything begins and ends with the money. Sure, there's other stuff going on in between

but it's the big fucking "M" that runs the show. "How much?" That's always the question the client's gotta get out of the way. For the escort it's always a case of spelling things out clearly before you get down to it – first off they know they gotta get the agency fee. Twenty-five smackers! Then they gotta lay down their set of prices – £20 for a quick handie; £35 for a massage and wank; £50 a blow; £75 a fuck; £100 for S&M; over the odds for yellows, browns and reds. I don't tell them what to charge. But that's round about what my boys get.

'So, as we both know, it's all about putting your stall out. You want this, then it's gonna cost you that. You want something more, then it's gonna cost you something more. If you keep it that simple, things will go fine. You stick to the rules, you understand that this is a business, then things will hum for you. You'll find then, with the money already taken care of, that there's room for some compassion. I hate that term, "caring capitalism", but sometimes I think that's what this agency is built on. We start with the money – always the fucking money – and then we invest some concern and care into our work. Not always – *never* always – but most of the time.

'Before you say anything kid, I'll make a little analogy here. I go into a hi-fi store. I want to buy a new sound system because I want to pump out some Mahler and Schubert louder than ever before. First thing I do is I work out how much I can spend. I look at my bank balance and I see I can spare £2,000. So I go into the store. First thing I tell the guy is the type of system I want. First thing he asks is how much I want to spend. Start with the money. Just like here. People work out before what they wanna spend for a particular service and they phone to find out if their figure tallies with ours. Once we understand each other then we're away. Sure, the guy in the hi-fi shop's gonna try and squeeze a few more quid out of me but then, if he's any good, he's also gonna invest some care into his pitch. He's gonna show me what's on display. He knows more about this sort of

stuff than me – so I'm depending on him to whip me through what he's got. The fly-by-nights always fuck out in the end; it's the guys who show a little respect to the customer who do the best. So I go to the hi-fi store where I know I'm gonna get jerked around the least. Maybe it's a little more expensive but I'm getting the service my money's meant to pay for. And then, to end it all, if he does his job well, I decide what I want and then we make our exchange. His shop gets the money, he gets his commission, I get the goods. Same principle here – you pay, baby, and then we'll play for you.

'The money underpins it. We know we gotta deal with the price so we get it out of the way. Then we have some human interaction, share some knowledge, a joke, whatever. I'm happy, he's happy – never always, though, I'm not saying that. So what poor Marina forgot was that she was running a business and not a charity.'

Howard's breathless extolling of free-market principles sounded dully practical to me but then I remembered, as he kept on pointing out, how bizarre Marina Studzinski's sexual romanticism appeared on the other side of town. As preferable as it might have looked on this page for Howard Lambert to have had a similarly philanthropic dream, "Pumps" was such a burnished success story precisely because of his hard-headed pragmatism. For him, that 'oldest profession' line merely hammered home the inextricable links capitalism has with prostitution. But, before we could get bogged down in economic theory, Howard was up and running again with his original business plan.

'When I started this agency, it was a new venture for me. Now I'm not some financial mogul taking a flier on a whim. I thought this one through carefully. I studied the market, I sussed out the competition. I even knew that, soon after we started, the 0898 telephone contact lines were going to get rolling. But we were never going for that sort of market, we've never aimed just for the jaded cruiser who wants to

do his pick-up on the telephone, at home. Sure, we get those guys, which is great, but I always knew we were going for the specialists, for the money men – the guys who couldn't or wouldn't go looking in the clubs or the pubs or the streets for a pick-up. The guys who want a discreet but funky agency. Some of my clients are kinda famous but they're safe as they can get here. I always knew this sort of agency was needed. In straight prostitution you've had them for fucking decades. In gay prostitution there was a more desperate need – what with all the homophobia and the need for some people to keep this a secret life. They know that we can keep the secret.

'So I worked out quickly that the key thing in a gay agency is not so much the advertising or the big PR trip – you gotta lie lower than that. No, kid, what matters is finding the right sort of escort. It sounds old-fashioned maybe, but this is why this agency has more regulars than any other – 'cos I choose the right sort of boys. And you get those crazy nights like I've told you about where you have five new clients phoning in, each with a particular kink, but we handle it. All I do each week is make sure my ads go into the gay mags and the neighbourhood papers. And from there the phones keep on ringing . . . and we're away, syphoning off loads of honest money!'

In the face of such rampantly pumping capitalism, I could feel the twang of that old liberal twinge inside me. As such an obviously 'out' gay man, was he not bothered by the hypocrisy of 'secret' homosexuality? While the source of such furtiveness lay in the acute homophobia still lining certain quarters of this country, especially in the pages of the tabloid press, did he not feel empathy with the view that the more homosexuals who 'came out' publicly, the less room there would be for prejudice?

'Kid, kid, kid! Of course I hate the prejudice, I hate the hypocrisy. I've lived with it all my life. And yeah, of course things would be different if everyone's "true" lives were opened up, if people were forced to reveal their innermost

desires and secrets. We'd see how similar we really all are, we'd look ridiculous being prejudiced towards one set of people when it came out that sometimes we liked to swing a little with those very same people. But, kid, I can't go with the "Outrage" boys, the gangs who want to do the forcing, who want to make what is essentially private, your own feelings, public. I really don't side with the whole "outing" thing, that if you're in the public eye and you're privately gay then you have to be exposed. There's a terrible brutality in that. And I find it hard to decide which people should suffer for the supposed benefit of the "masses".

'Look, I'm happy for the world to know who I am, what I like to do, but that's me. There are other sides to me that I prefer to keep to myself. I don't want to have to hang everything out for everyone to stare at. Some people have difficulty in being gay. Yes, because there is prejudice, there is fucking monstrous homophobia. So these particular individuals are frightened. They fear that they'll lose their careers, their friends, their family. For them I feel more pity than I do anger. It must be a horrendous thing to live such a double-life. I'm not even talking about privacy here – I'm talking about living with deceit, with having to lie about yourself all the time, having to deny your natural instincts. Whew, what a bummer, if you'll pardon the pun, kid. They lack a certain kind of courage but should they be punished for that? No, I don't think so.'

'So, in a way, a discreet agency like "Pumps", inadvertently or not, maintains the homophobic status quo?'

'If you like, I guess that could be true. But then I'm here to make money, to run a good and popular business. I'm not here to change the world. I think the world's pretty much always been this way – people are just a little more sophisticated in their deceptions, in their prejudices. What am I going to do about it? Go marching round Trafalgar Square wearing a "Gay Pride" T-shirt, calling for an end to hypocrisy? Now this might make me and my few friends feel a little better about ourselves 'cos it'll seem like we're

"doing something", it'll seem like we belong to an enraged community for a while, it'll boost our proud identities. But, fuck, who'll be listening? I'm a proud enough man anyway, I know who I am, I know who my friends are, I know my community. I speak to them all day and night long. They're mostly just looking for love, for some excitement. Maybe this is only my justification – the "caring" myth I put into my capitalism – but I believe that this agency, even though it begins and ends with money, pumps some honest excitement and some safe pleasure into otherwise screwed-up lives.

But, talking of safe pleasure, had AIDS not changed the way his 'community' perceived both itself and the straight world? Hadn't the onset of one ravaging personal tragedy after another led to an inevitable politicization of the gay community? – at least in the double-edged respect that while they were being ignorantly ostracised as the creators of the 'plague', gay men were simultaneously leading the crusade for safe sex?

'Ultimately, I can only speak properly for myself. I can only say that the way AIDS has politicized me is that it's made me face up to the fact that there is both a beauty and a savagery to life. The friends I have lost through AIDS taught me something about that beauty. When they were at their most physically wrecked point they still glowed. It's hard to talk about, all of this. But the beauty I mean was in their living; the savagery in the way they died. These people I'm talking about, these friends of mine, they were amongst the first to die in England of AIDS. So it's been with me for a long time now and so I've changed. If I'm politicized now, I'm politicized to truth. And if there's a truth that can be pinned down it's "Live, fuck it, live now . . . you're alive, not forever, not always, but for now".

'And most of my "Pumps" boys know this truth. They all have a friend who's died or is dying of AIDS. It doesn't even need to be on the agenda here, safe sex – it's just a given now. There is much deeper awareness amongst gay

people as a whole – but it is in prostitution, really, where the greatest strides towards AIDS-consciousness have been made. How many prostitutes, the pros I'm talking about, do you know who're "unsafe"?'

'None, now that Marina's gone out of business.'

'Yeah, she sounds like a '60s sweetie to me – back in the days when you really could think that sex was a healer rather than a killer. But those days have gone, kid, they've gone . . . My boys know that, and my clients have to know that . . .'

Michael Bair was one of those clients. More than that he was also one of the very few long-term regulars who had actually met Howard Lambert. The 'Pumps' proprietor chose, very rarely and always with some discernment, that small selection of his clients to whom he became more than just a familiar telephone voice.

'We're friends, I think I can say that much,' declared Michael, a slim, moustached and ardent Arts Administrator in his early-forties. 'And while it's strange for a client to become a friend of the proprietor, I spoke to Howard many times over the phone before we met. I really am one of his old regulars. Maybe there're other clients who are more frequent callers in shorter bursts but I'm pretty steady. Howard knows, if nothing else, he's going to get two calls a month from me for an escort.'

Michael first called 'Pumps' five years before. He had then been openly gay for the last decade, his marriage having failed disastrously after three painful years. In contrast to the protective veil Howard draws over the years before "Pumps", Michael was agonizingly honest about his own past.

'I think I knew I was gay when I was very young, maybe when I was nine or ten. I noticed that I really didn't have to pretend to prefer boys. I just did. Most of the other little boys were the ones leading the "double lives" then, making out that they couldn't care less about girls. I thought about

that in later years, when I was the one having to pretend that I wasn't attracted to men. It seemed a cruel sort of irony.

'I really resented the pressure on me. "When are you going to find a girlfriend?" everyone seemed to be asking – my parents, my brother, my friends. What could I say? So I'd get huffy and they'd say, "Aaaah, it's just 'cos he's shy!" And I started to believe them. Maybe I just had some sort of barrier to overcome with the opposite sex. But, deep down, I knew that I wasn't shy of women. I'd always got on with the girls – at school, at university. I liked women – but not like *that*! The real problem was that I was shy around men whenever there was even a hint of intimacy. I had to bottle so much up that I started to feel ill. Then one day I met this woman who I really liked – we got on well – and I thought, "Fuck it, just go for it!" We did and we were married within a year. I was happy then, for a while. But things started to fall apart – mainly over sex, as it would do.

'She was much more experienced than me and she knew that there was something that didn't quite work between us. At first she thought it was because this was my first sexual relationship but, after a while, it became obvious that the sex just wasn't going to happen. I felt like an absolute dog – I cared about her and I was making her so unhappy. So we decided to take a break after a few years. We'd both go away for a month and see how we felt when we got back.

'I went to Greece, to one of the islands – subconsciously to get fucked silly, I guess. It could have been a disaster – could have turned me off all sex once and for all – if I started out with one of those terrible one-night stands you sometimes end up with. But I was lucky. I was on the beach on my first afternoon and, much to my initial horror, most people were walking around in the buff. But then I started to relax even though I kept my costume on, still being a good boy then. Then I saw this guy. He was maybe my age now – fifteen years older than me then. Great body, tanned,

really hung too. That's what I couldn't stop staring at – his cock! Anyway, he ambles over after a while and says "Hi". He's Greek but he speaks wonderful English. Well, without being too coy about it, one thing led to another and about an hour later I'm in his home, on his bed and he's giving me the most incredible blow job! And when he fucked me he was so gentle, so good, that I just loved it. I couldn't even believe at first that we were going to fuck face to face, that it was possible to have sex with a guy like that. I never did go back to my wife after that – even though we're friends again and she's able to handle the fact that I'm gay, and always was.

'But when I feel angry about the pressure I was put under I also feel angry about the pain that I caused her. We should never have got married – it was just that I felt hounded into it by this grotesque social pressure to be straight. So I'm angry at myself too for the hurt I caused her in those three years. That's why I always feel like an open nerve of mine is being hit when I encounter homophobia. Someone like Howard, he can just shrug it off. Not me, I just want to strangle the fuckers who go on about "poofs" and "gay plagues"! They have no idea of the pain they cause not just to "out" homosexuals but to all these poor souls who're vacillating between coming out or not. Let them fucking come out! But, shit, I can't ever see that happening! It's too simple, it's too threateningly right, you'd have half the population out!'

Even when, as Michael Bair occasionally felt able to do, you're gay and you can emulate Howard Lambert's steely dismissal of homophobia as an irritating irrelevancy, another shade of pain emerges. Irrespective of the thrill he felt in that first successful fuck and ensuing two-week holiday island romance, Michael Bair's sustained difficulty after his return to Britain was to turn a passing sexual encounter into something more permanent.

'Now you know that it's hard enough keeping a straight relationship moving on the right track,' he said one day,

'so imagine what it's like when you have these outside pressures. My first real relationship with a man here lasted for eighteen months but it took an unbearable toll on me because we had to keep it a secret from his family. I was just "a friend" and so when he visited them I could only go with him once in every four visits otherwise they might "suspect". It's obviously not the way to stay open and honest with each other when you're lying to others all the time. My next lover was fine like that – he was even more out than me – but we broke up after a couple of years 'cos he fell in love with another man. That was tough but it was just a love-pain thing. Happens to most of us.

'All those emotional heartaches are tough to deal with – whether you're a man or a woman, straight or gay. But if you're gay there's the additional problem that it's even more difficult to meet someone than if you're straight. You've got to figure out who might be prised out of the closet sometimes. So, when your heart's all aching and you think you just better go out and find someone else, if you're a gay man it's easy just to cruise in the hope that a one-nighter might even turn into an all-timer. Maybe that happens once in a million. I'm not one of those lucky ones. I can't even begin to tell you how many men I've picked up or been picked up by – it turns me on, sure, that sleazy kind of thrill, but after a while I just got depressed by the emptiness of it all. So I gave up on clubs and pubs and I started to answer lonely hearts adverts. I met some good people but it's a laborious way of organizing your social life. So then I turned to the telephone contacts. I still use those sometimes – but, Christ, it can be a bleak experience. The messages themselves usually turn me right off; and even when I've fancied the sound of someone it's rarely worked. It's just a telephonic cruise after all. So I put my own ad on after a while – but all the guys I got were married or bi with a girlfriend and there was always their fucking guilt thing to deal with!

'So you'll guess why I'm a regular "Pumps" man. It's

quite an expensive business but at least I know what I'm getting. A spurt of great sex and no guilty married men – which is a real relief. Although I'm really just looking for a steady relationship, I still have nights when I get randy and incredibly turned on by sleaze. And there's safe sleaze with one of the "Pumps" boys, with someone like Johnny, who's fucking delicious, even if he is hard as nails . . .'

Johnny – the escort I had spent most time with from 'Pumps', for Howard had always described him as his 'most popular boy' – seemed less nail-hard than almost vacuously light to me. I say 'light' in the sense of an emotional intangibility at the core of him. This apparent absence of feeling enabled him to become whomever his client most desired. Michael Bair, as he himself admitted, had a weakness for handsomely angular young men who got straight down to the business in hand. Johnny was good at looking tough and then taking his leathers off and getting into some hard-working oral sex five minutes after he'd walked through the door. He could also, Howard emphasized, play the parts of the shy toy-boy, the quietly menacing boot-boy, the belt-burning uniformed prison warder or the ravaged 'nephew'.

Johnny could do all these parts even though his emotional range seemed to stretch only from silently smouldering to quietly cool. He could also smile, faintly, and sneer, tiredly. Where Lee Docherty, his most obvious straight counterpart, had reached for transformation in his own anomie, Johnny just drifted lazily – as the personified 'empty vessel'. Although he was the most spikily handsome 'Pumps' boy, I found him empty of obvious narcissism. He never appeared to care about anything, especially about the way he dressed or looked. Perhaps, on second thoughts, that made Johnny the ultimate narcissist for he did whatever pleased him – or, more accurately, whatever troubled him the least. He would wear the same clothes day after day until Howard brought out the newly cleaned and pressed gear he'd left

from the time before and breathed out, 'Get a fucking shave too, kid, that stubble looks terrible on you.'

At first I thought that this was an inevitable front, a disguise to depersonalize himself as he flipped through his hollow-eyed, boy-prostitute archetypes. But the more I spoke to him the less this wall of blankness shifted. Johnny said the work was 'All right, not too bad I suppose,' that he was doing it 'for the money, I guess', that he lived in Stockwell and that there wasn't much apart from rap and drugs on which he spent the money. I took the last statement as an incredible breakthrough and reeled out what I thought was an impressive liturgy to rappers from the East to West Coast, from Public Enemy to Ice-T, hoping that at least one of the original gangsters on my rocking mc list would get Johnny to say more than a sentence at a time. It worked. 'Man, I never know who's rapping what. I just turn that shit on loud.'

Fired by this two sentence breakthrough we moved onto his drug habit.

'I like being wasted, sometimes,' he said. 'Joints and pills – that's all – never anything heavy.' Despite the excessive emotional wastage, Johnny did not look a physical wreck and it was hard to imagine him finding the interest to experiment with any great variety of drugs.

When I mentioned to Howard that I wasn't making much headway with Johnny, he laughed a little and said, 'That's 'cos there's not much of Johnny to make headway with, kid. He's really popular with the clients but he's not interested in much, our Johnny. I also thought he was a druggie at first – used to check his arms, look into his eyes and yet he was always clean of anything hard. Then I realized that this is just the way he is. He doesn't care much about anything – but he does his job here, that's all I ask from him. And that's why he likes working here. I ask nothing from him that he doesn't want to give. It's strange but that's the way he is – your friend Marina and he should try and meet somewhere in the middle. She could give him some of

that healing feeling of hers, he could give her back some of his heartlessness.'

It was a strange word to use, 'heartlessness'. For all his hardened capitalism routine Howard had, in Michael Bair's opinion, 'a heart as big as his head – and that's a big head he's got. He just doesn't like to let on about the heart stuff. Shit, he and Johnny couldn't be more different.'

Although that was, by then, hardly news to me, there came a night when I really knew what Michael meant; and that same night I also remembered what he had once said to me – that when he was married he 'realized that women are really beautiful. Every woman has a time when she's beautiful. She mightn't know it – like my wife didn't and I didn't tell her properly – but that beauty is there. Now men, even though I say this as a gay man, men can never have *that* kind of beauty. Not even someone as sunken-cheeked and green-eyed as Johnny. He is never, and he never will be, as classically beautiful as my wife was. But, and this is stating the obvious, there's something different about a man. And Howard is often everything my wife was not. He's anything but beautiful to look at, he's not really gentle, he's obsessive, he's sometimes vain, he thinks too much about himself. But Howard, for all that, is attractive; for he's fired-up, he's flaming, his heart's burning. Yeah, Howard, he may not be beautiful but he burns, he really burns . . .'

And that night, as Howard and I sat in the dark, half-talking and half-listening to his infernal *Winterreise* for the umpteenth time, he suddenly swung his chair round – not to answer the 'Pumps' phone as I expected but to open his desk drawer from where he removed a small photograph. He switched on his thin pencil-torch and showed me the print. It was of a man I had never seen before. He was sitting on a wall eating a slice of watermelon.

'This, kid, was the man I lived with for the ten years before I started this agency,' Howard said as he shone the narrow beam of light down on the photograph. 'I really

loved him and when we heard one night that he was HIV + I was so wild – with grief, with anger. Anyway, he had the virus, from someone else. I found out later that I didn't. But by then he was already starting to die and there were many days when I wished I had it with him if only to share some of his pain. But I didn't have it. And now I'm glad of that even though I think of him, here, every night. Especially with this music. Schubert was his baby, he used to say.'

Howard never spoke to me of him again. He laughed out loud at the 'Schubert-baby' line, switched off the torch and let the photo rest on his knees. He pushed the volume of *Winterreise* up high and sat back in silence. It was then that I thought of Michael Bair's words. Howard was burning then, as he still was when the red telephone light blinked again a few minutes later. And I imagined I saw that burning continue even as he lowered the sound of Schubert, swung his legs back onto the table and, still holding his photograph, said, in the voice he always used: 'Yeah, this is "Pumps" and I'm Howard. What can I do for you?'

Chapter Eleven

Searching for Serenity

I had always known, right from the start of this task, that the time would come when I could no longer avoid the streets. But along the way, especially during that first year of work, I tried to con myself into believing that I already knew enough of this most basic form of prostitution. My prevarication had its source in fear; fear of what I would find amid the anticipated dirt and depravation.

So during my more desperate moments of delusion I resorted to memory. How could I forget that I had walked past more than one street corner where a prostitute had lent over to speak to a prospective client through the open window of his car? There were times when I had been approached directly by some ladies of the night who had, with that universal euphemism, enquired as to whether or not I was 'looking for business'.

Within this dredging of the past I hunted in the present for some kind of truth to affirm my supposedly intricate observation of street prostitution. Yet there was a problem with my memory. It was stuck on a permanent curve of cliché. Every prostitute I could remember passing on some dark street wore a black beret, a red dress, tucked in with a tight white belt, fishnet stockings and red high-heels. Although I could never quite place anything but a lipstick-blurred outline to a face, I was sure, having met Jackie in Chinatown, that there was also a tattoo somewhere high up on the prostitute's arm. But when I tried to work out

whether that inked imprint was of a butterfly or simply spelled out 'Lolita' I had to give into the realization that the knowledge I had of street prostitution was built more on myth than fact.

So I went walking at night with Docherty in King's Cross where I met some of his favourite prostitutes. We spoke about their passing trade and about drugs and pimps, those backdrops of dependence and exploitation so endemic to their work and the women spoke with both pathos and wit about their 'fucked-up lives' over polystyrene cups of sugary coffee.

My time with Docherty's friends made me realize that it was not so much the street itself I feared but the unknown it represented. I knew that if I stuck to a reasonable stretch of street and kept my head down I could evade the kind of trouble I would never be hard enough to handle. I could find haunting stories out on the street; but there was still something beyond them, a place where prostitution reared its most sinister head.

I had heard rumours of snuff movies and child prostitution, of men paying money to have their faces booted in on Hampstead Heath and their testicles ground in a vice. These were not stories I imagined I had the courage to face and so instead of attempting a definitive book on this most ancient of subjects I chose to pursue a more personalized version.

And with whom could it have been better to start than with the likes of Mandy Kavanagh and Lee Docherty? If the way they talked about the few delights and myriad damnations of prostitution was easier to hear, it was not just because they were articulate and affluent. Those assets softened their explications of prostitution but, more significantly, they were the two people most able to exude the sense that they were in control of their lives.

As I got to know them better I realized that their command over themselves, although not fabricated, was sustained as much by personal mythology as Jackie's resilient prostitution

was swathed by Tyrone's heroin addiction. Yet, rather than obliterating any one of the three prostitutes, these respective myths and vices only seemed to focus more sharply the extent of control they were forced to bring to their lives in order to survive. And as long as there remained an understanding, however irregular, that these people were involved in prostitution for some sort of reason it was still possible to think relatively clearly about their lives even when they were forced to give others some kind of stunted pleasure - as it was also plain to see the different kinds of philanthropy and business sense motivating Sara Dale, Marina Studzinski and Howard Lambert.

Like all of them I most feared losing control when I went out, not so much into the streets but into the furthest reaches of others' sexuality where ecstasy is demarcated by the extent of suffering. Undoubtedly there were other kinds of stories to be heard; stories with a gaping hole in the middle where constraint and compassion, or even irony, might once have resided. During the week of the previous Christmas I already knew that *that* dreaded time was coming when I could no longer elude the abandonment central to so much prostitution.

Ironically, this recognition stemmed from a court case where the absence of any exchange of cash for sex was held up by the prosecuting council as being the only redeeming feature of a scenario described by QC Michael Worsley as 'brute homosexual activity in sinister circumstances, about as far removed as can be imagined from the concept of human love'. On 19 December of that year, 1990, the ringleaders of a nationwide group of men who met regularly for 'vicious and degrading sado-masochistic sex sessions' were jailed for their 'uncivilised' sexual preferences. The most severe sentences were meted out to Colin Lasky, a forty-eight-year-old computer operator from Pontypridd, and Graham Cadman, a fifty-two-year-old ice-cream salesman from Bolton, who were both jailed for four-and-a-half years.

The case was deeply disturbing in both its extremities and complexities. The 'Spanner' group, twelve of whom were charged at the Old Bailey, sought gratification from vicious beatings of each other and in the most frightening forms of genital torture. Apart from using the typical S&M tools of cellars, flogging benches, chains, pulleys, whips, ropes, masks, uniforms and home-made pornographic depictions of their activities, the men transcended almost unimaginable barriers of sexual punishment. The most graphic example was their penchant for nailing each other's penises onto blocks of wood.

It was like something out of the most gruesome masculine nightmare; for, truly, what could be more traumatic than the idea of a toothy ice-cream salesman nailing one's most prized possession to a wooden block while a fancy-dress proprietor from Shrewsbury videoed the apocalyptic moment of pain for posterity? The case spread not only a despairing kind of shock through me but also forced a confrontation with some of the judgement's more problematic issues.

Despite the aptly named Judge Rant's assertions that his sentencing was 'not a witch-hunt against homosexuals', his reliance on that nebulous 'civilization' phrase indicated his discomfort with the group's homosexuality. His clear inference was that it might be acceptable, in a discreetly civilised kind of way, for a man to have his buttocks lashed by a woman until they bled and for another woman to be chained to a wall for a weekend and made to do nothing but urinate and defecate and serve the sexual whims of her partner, as long as such actions involved the free will of those concerned. Yet 'brute homosexual activity', irrespective of the participants' choice, was punishable by imprisonment. I could not keep that 'Why?' word from rolling around my head. Why did men derive pleasure from causing and enduring such pain? And why were they jailed for it?

For even the state acknowledged that all those involved in the Old Bailey trial participated willingly in group S&M

sex and that those who were the subjects of genital torture even 'appeared pleased' to suffer such profuse pain. Moreover, the defence argued, even within such dire sexual carnage an element of control had never been completely relinquished. None of the men had ever been hospitalized after a sex session and the discretion of their activities was such that there was an element of pure chance about the police's discovery of their existence.

The National Council for Civil Liberties condemned both the imprisonment of the men and Judge Rant's final assessment that 'Much has been said about individual liberty and the rights people have to do what they want with their own bodies but the courts must draw the line between what is acceptable in a civilized society and what is not'. In response, the NCCL's director general, Andrew Puddephat, described this as being 'outrageous – what the law is saying is that we will now investigate and scrutinize private behaviour, whether there have been any complaints or not . . . these are important principles about individual liberty. These are issues best not left to judges.'

Precisely to whom such issues should be left remained blurred. Certainly I was not equipped, perhaps still being pinned down by the terror of that grisly wooden block, to penetrate all the ambiguities of the court's judgement with any degree of lucidity. Anyway, rather than just scaring me off smiley ice-cream vendors for life, the macabre nature of the 'Spanner' group's business with each other's bodies had opened up memories of similar sexual violence. Hampstead, that leafy bastion of London liberalism, had been one of their more curious choices of venue and this reminded me of a murder on the Heath a few years before.

John Hudspith, a masochistic homosexual, was beaten to death on the Heath's one notorious stretch for late-night cruising by a group of men whom he had paid a few pounds to administer him 'a good thrashing'. The beating began casually enough with kicks and blows to the head and body being accompanied by routine homophobic taunts from the

hired attackers. When they backed off after a couple of minutes, with their victim now bruised and bleeding, Hudspith supposedly challenged the men by enquiring if this, bruises and blood, was 'the best' they could summon? Antagonized now, the men laid viciously into John Hudspith until he slumped down into a larger pool of blood, with his voice stilled forever.

His death was one of the first to illuminate the shadowy world of sadomasochistic murder, or was one still just supposed to call it 'accidental death'?

One of Hudspith's best friends, Murray Erskine, who worked at the Bank of England, suffered a similar fate the following December, in 1989. His body was discovered in a black plastic bag lying beneath a tree on the banks of the River Cam in Cambridge a few months later. The identity of the murderer has still to be conclusively proved although the police are certain that Erskine met him through one of the personal adverts he placed regularly in *Loot*. Erskine advertized for contact with heterosexuals who enjoyed 'disciplining' homosexuals and it is believed that this was how he first met a mysterious man his friends simply knew as 'the Rhodesian' in September 1987.

'The Rhodesian' had apparently been a member of the Selous Scouts, the maniacal marine-type core of the white army which, throughout the 1970s, attempted to stem the tide of Zimbabwe's War of Independence; he had then reputedly graduated to membership of the SAS. There were other conflicting stories concerning his exact identity but all that appeared certain was that he was a man who found sexual gratification through meting out violence against others. 'The Rhodesian' has yet to be caught and Murray Erskine has been reduced to the following bland police description that, when alive, he was 'employed at [the] Bank of England, [a] practising sado-masochistic homosexual, [a] wine drinker'.

Murray Erskine had also spent time at the gay London Boxing and Wrestling Club, where John Hudspith, too, had

been a regular visitor. It was this connection which led me to the fringes of their death. In the course of my meetings with Howard Lambert at 'Pumps' he had mentioned that one of his 'more perverted clients', someone who was also reputed to have had vague links with the Old Bailey 'obscenity trialists', had been particularly keen on boxing. That anecdote had stayed with me and so, with a sense of encroaching trepidation, I returned once more in search of Howard Lambert's help.

When I left 'Pumps' a few nights later, with the name and number I had come for, I knew that my search had unequivocally begun. I knew that I was set to find some withered facet of prostitution. Up until that point, I had seen compassion and resilience as much as abuse and despair. I had a picture of prostitution, made up of these differing maxims and peopled by characters who varied between being larger than life and lower than grime. But it was never going to be enough to witness only these truths when there were clearly so many more forbidding tracks leading to prostitution's most forbidden world. The 'Spanner' trial and the masochistic deaths of John Hudspith and Murray Erskine meant that I could no longer block out such brutality.

The apprehension I had long been feeling was hardly diminished by Howard's dismay at the course I had chosen. He too had followed the newspapers' account of the trial and, despite the avowed sexual radicalism he had brought to 'Pumps' where 'no desire is too kinky for our boys', he was also disturbed by the acts of sexual violence carried out by the group. It was clear that the wood-block trick had struck the same kind of alarm-bell inside Howard. 'See,' he said to me, 'we're not such different guys after all; we have the same nightmares . . .' He wondered why I had to seek out such 'derangement' when I had already discovered so much 'dignity' amongst prostitutes.

The trouble was that I still did not really know what

Howard's words meant. If Simone Maillard retained her 'dignity' whilst flogging a client she despised, did it necessarily mean that those desiring the dreaded nailing of the block were merely 'deranged' and not worth knowing? Although it would have been simpler to believe this, primarily because it fitted in with the way that two seeming opposites like Howard and myself thought, I needed to see such 'desire', twisted or not, close-up before I could attach to it the name of 'derangement'.

There was, however, a less high-minded motive driving me on. During the preceding year I had sometimes spoken to friends or written publicly about a few of the prostitutes I had met and there were hints that some people were bothered by the fact that the hookers I'd met with were not the grim and defenceless victims the liberal reader might imagine them to be. As had often been the case with me, their perceptions of prostitution were crucified by cliché. They were strangely troubled to hear that I had run into more university graduates than tattooed junkies, even though there had certainly been a few of the latter, during my initial year of prostitute writing.

Perhaps the real cause of concern was that I had found that the subject, and some of its attendant themes, was not that far removed from our own lives. Yet, I knew that the reverse was waiting for me. I knew it would be bleak and so to those who wondered if I was trying to glamorize prostitution I said nothing. I had had my time of fascination with the high-class, high-minded hookers and now, I said to myself as I wandered away from 'Pumps' trying to inject some needed bravado into my step, I was ready to go wherever I had to go to find prostitution's most clandestine mire of pain and punishment. But, even if this was the quickest route to reshaping preconceptions, I was still terrified.

Colin Dugmore, his left cheek twitching involuntarily every other minute, looked more anxious than even I did as we

sat opposite each other at a plastic table in a café stinking of grease along the Old Kent Road. He was a tall man, thin and light on his feet, with a crooked nose and his head shaved into a number two cut crop. He wore a grey shirt, black 501s and a new set of Doc Martens. There was something striking about his austerity, perhaps because he seemed to be years younger than his actual age of thirty-four; but, for me, he was most interesting because he looked like he had stepped out of a Robert Bresson film where some sepulchral beauty is uncovered in extremes of denial.

For a long while, as we hunched awkwardly over our glass cups of tea, it seemed that he was about to take his leave of me without even making the flimsiest excuse. His eyes flitted back and forth to the half-open door, squeaking on its worn hinges every time another gust of wind swept across the littered street outside.

He had sounded suave on the phone two nights before when I called him and, using Howard's advice, told him about some of the boxing features I had written and that I was busy writing a book about, amongst other things, 'pain and punishment'. Although he had been quick to stress that he had 'no time for a fag like Howard', he had agreed to meet me on the condition that I accepted that this would merely be an 'introductory encounter'.

This was obviously not my first meeting with a stranger connected to prostitution and, in the past, I had usually managed amiably enough to set my interviewee at some kind of ease by talking a little about the book and confirming that I was not interested in disclosing the identity of anyone who wished to remain anonymous. I thought I had mastered a kind of affable, self-effacing discourse which convinced the prostitute or pimp or punter that my head was probably too high in the clouds to pose them any kind of threat by making their name public.

But my technique with Dugmore was clearly deficient. When my typical splurge of words tapered off into silence he made an expansive face-rubbing gesture and mumbled

that he wasn't really involved in prostitution in any way and that the whole thing would be a waste of time for both of us. Suddenly, my trepidation from the previous week crumbled. I became absurdly desperate, realizing that my intended headlong plunge into evil was about to plop into embarrassingly stagnant waters.

But Howard Lambert had his uses at times like these. He had the extraordinary ability to perceive what kind of conversation to use with a specific client. Out of nowhere his voice from the week before echoed through my head. 'Talk bloody boxing with the crazy fucker if you have to talk to him – that's all he can talk about when he's not getting his head smacked – bloody boxing!'

After a slick slug of cold tea I got going, talking boxing. I revealed a crudely calculating display of my links, however limited, with the boxing fraternity. I knew Hugh McIlvanney, the boxing writer for the *Observer*; I had interviewed British boxers like Chris Eubank, Nigel Benn, Herol Graham and the unfortunate Michael Watson; and, the real shuddering jab from the shoulder for Colin Dugmore, a couple of times I'd spent some time in Atlantic City and Las Vegas with Mike Tyson, before his rape conviction, and the eighty-year-old trainer Eddie Futch who had sparred with Joe Louis and worked the corner of Joe Frazier and Larry Holmes. It didn't amount to much, I thought, but to Dugmore, apparently, it opened up some kind of gateway to pugilistic authority.

I knew that I was in the ring with him, to use a haymaker of a maxim, when he flipped a pound coin across the table to the old Greek man who'd made our tea and, with his cheek smooth and still again, murmured, 'Come on, we'll talk at my place.'

As we walked briskly back up the Old Kent Road towards the streets leading to Borough station on the south-eastern edge of central London, Dugmore hummed something that sounded like a deranged monk's most disconcerting litany. 'Mmmmmhmmm, mmmmmhmmmm, hmmmhmmm,

hmmmhmmm, mmmmhmmm, mmmmmhmmm' went his hum as his shaved head nodded from side to side, now and then in rhythm with a hard slap of his hand against the long brick wall we walked past. A few old dears out with their terriers for a Thursday morning stroll smiled sadly at us, as if they knew that Dugmore and I had sunk a few notches below their own level of senility.

Dugmore appeared not to notice, lost as he was in his humming and wall-bashing. My fear rose again. Howard's voice swam back into earshot, telling me that Dugmore was out of his head, he was a complete pervert, a raving psychopath. He had supposedly known a couple of the group convicted at the Old Bailey, he was a deeply disturbed but seriously committed dabbler in severe sado-masochism. Maybe he liked to pay lean young skinheads sizeable sums of money to beat him up but who was to say that he wouldn't get some kind of deranged kick out of watching a pinko-leftie like myself being fucked up by one of his cruelly sadistic boys? What if this was a set-up – as all that debonair crap over the phone about 'introductory encounters' implied. What about the twitching of his cheek in the caff? What if he and his crazy S&M cronies were out to teach me a lesson? What if they kidnapped me and chained me to their cellar in deepest Borough and nailed my now shrivelled penis to a huge block of wood? What if smiley Dugmore offered me an ice-cream as soon as we got to his flat door? What could Dugmore be fucking thinking of but the worst kind of torture while he hummed that death-like dirge?

'Mmmmwhmmm, mmmmhmmm, hmmmhmmm, mmmhmmm, mmmmhmmm, mmmmhmmm . . .' It went on and on until, just as I was about to make a dash for it, we turned into a block of council flats and the humming broke off. 'Here we are,' smiled Dugmore, his teeth looking normal and unlike those belonging to the manic ice-cream vendor, 'It's not much maybe, but it's still home sweet home to me . . .'

Dugmore's flat was in the basement of a brick council block and, as he opened the door, the smell of freshly cooked onions spread out into the narrow corridor where we were standing. I later learnt that his flat, like the Soho prostitute's room I had visited with Alistair, always carried this oniony odour. But when I asked him about the smell he looked at me blankly, as if I was mad. When I persisted a little further he sniffed the air extravagantly before declaring that he could 'smell nothing' and that, besides, he hadn't cooked any onions for years.

Apart from the lingering onion tang, the flat was filled with boxing memorabilia – mostly cups and medals that Dugmore's dad had won as an amateur boxer in the East End in the late 1940s – and assorted knickknacks such as twin china bulldogs with the faces of 'Monty' and 'Winston', Union Jack coloured eggs, a Biggles-type flying helmet and an old photograph of the long-closed White City stadium. The whole flat was locked into this flashback and although I had once known a girl in Brighton who had decked out her sea-side bed-sit in such a fashion she had done it as a studenty exercise in kitsch and the whole process had hardly lasted a couple of weeks before she swapped her post-World War Two fad for a more lively Gypsy Queen phase in interior decoration.

Dugmore was different. I heard later that he had lived in this tiny basement flat with his mother and father for the first twenty years of his life. He then spent a few years away from home, living in a squat in Brixton, before finally returning to Borough when his father died in the early 1980s. When his mother 'expired a few months later with a broken heart', according to Dugmore, he had the flat to himself. He did not appear to remember either of his parents with any great affection – his father had been a bitter, hobbling ex-boxer who had hurt his leg in an accident on the local underground where he worked his whole life while his mother was apparently little more than 'a woman who did a lot of washing and moaning'. Yet their influence, perhaps

right down to the age-old residue of stale onions, still held sway in this small home.

This is not to say that there were only old objects in Dugmore's flat. Apart from a large colour television set there was a brand new video recorder and a whole line of glossy boxing videos and books on top of the home-made bookshelf still holding battered copies of *Jock Of The Bushveld, Reach For The Sky* and *Just William*. In the kitchen there was even a microwave, to heat up the Menu Master dishes Dugmore bought every week, and a blender which he used to make banana milkshakes after a particularly hard workout in the converted gym-cellar which was his greatest pride in life.

But before I got to see his gym that first day, Dugmore and I sat in his front room drinking cups of tea and watching videos of Ali, Frazier, Foreman, Norton, Holmes, Leonard, Hearns, Hagler and, his long-time favourite, Roberto 'Hands Of Stone' Duran. As the lace curtains billowed across Dugmore's face, with the wind still gusting strongly outside, he became increasingly animated when he realized that I knew his most cherished boxing stories. It was one thing to know that Duran had supposedly knocked down a horse with his bare hands when he was a fifteen-year-old street thug in Panama City and that Tommy Hearns had won six world titles at different weights but, at least in Colin Dugmore's book, it was something else to talk together about great thirteenth rounds, like Joe Louis-Billy Conn in '41, Joey Maxim–Sugar Ray Robinson in June '52 and Rocky Marciano-Jersey Joe Walcott in the September of that same year. That chit-chat elevated me to Dugmore's ranks of the boxing *cognoscenti*.

According to Dugmore, a grasp of these few facts meant that I had the history of 'the sweet science' not only in my head, but deep down in my blood. After all, he said, it's not exactly the type of knowledge one can show off with at parties, not like being able to 'spew out a couple of writers' names' in an effort to impress 'those trendy student-

type girls'. Not too many people cared about the thirteenth round of, say, the first Louis-Conn bout these days, Dugmore murmured wistfully – but he thought that it sounded like I did. I was less certain on this score, especially when Dugmore said that my boxing knowledge obviously made me his 'kind of guy' – a phrase which jolted me out of the sepia-tinted 1940s and right back into the 1990s where I was sitting in an onion-tinged room with, in Howard's now unforgettable words, 'a complete pervert, a raving psychopath'.

In an effort to relay a subtle message to Dugmore that I was not wholly his 'kind of guy', and to get the conversation back on the track of prostitution, I pointed out that there was a difference between us in the sense that, unlike him, I had never been involved in sado-masochism. Not wanting to excite his still unknown 'psychosis' unduly I enquired tentatively whether he would mind talking a little about his masochistic desires and his use of sadistic skinhead prostitutes to fulfil these sexual urges. As it's something of a provocative question at the best of times, I wasn't that surprised when Dugmore failed to warm to my new train of thought.

He lapsed into silence again and there was another fleeting twitch beneath his right eye. The front room window rattled softly and this seemed to flick a switch in Dugmore for he lent forward and spat out a few words which sounded like nothing on earth to me. 'Pardon, Colin?' I asked. His face contorted into a kind of twitching seizure and again he said something which I couldn't understand. I could feel my face now verging on a twitch of its own as I stared hopelessly at the television set where Ali and Frazier were still at it in the 'Thrilla In Manilla'.

'Good body shot,' I said, surprising myself, as Frazier hooked a big left hand into Ali's midriff. It must have been Howard's good influence for my bumbling non-sequitur had a calming influence on Dugmore. He grunted appreciatively and his face settled into a calmer expression as he looked

squarely at me and said clearly, 'I'll tell you if I can trust you.' At this point, in past interviews, I usually slipped on my most innocent face and blurted out that I liked to think I was a pretty trustworthy, ultra-sensitive, general all-round diamond geezer. But, still feeling my way with the emotionally volatile Dugmore, I just nodded back at him. We sat together in front of the video as if this was the only way to build a sense of trust between us.

As soon as the fight ended, with Ali finally stopping Frazier after fourteen excruciating rounds for both boxers, Dugmore flipped off the TV and gestured to me that I should follow him down a small wooden staircase at the back end of the kitchen. At the bottom, he swung open a bright red door and pulled hard on a string light switch which shed a glaring beam across the converted cellar. The light itself, a bulb on a long extension cord, hung from the ceiling centre, directly above the medium-sized ring which Dugmore had erected himself using building materials filched from skips all around south-east London.

In one corner of the room he had inserted a wooden beam along the length of the wall so that he could use it for strenuous sets of sit-ups – two hundred at a time, he claimed. A heavy punch bag also hung from the ceiling at the opposite end of the gym, as Dugmore insisted on calling it. It was the genuine article, a big brown bag of heavily padded leather which needed a heavy thud of a punch to get it swinging on its chain.

As he looked round his gym, as if it were he rather than I who was seeing it for the first time, Dugmore's eyes glistened. Then, in a faraway voice he said slowly, 'This is where I find my . . .' – he hesitated a long while before he completed his sentence in a stronger voice – '. . . my serenity.' I stared at him in disbelief. I hadn't been expecting to hear such a word from Dugmore, supposedly a pain-maddened masochist.

'Serenity' is a strange concept for most of us and when it slipped from Dugmore's mouth it sounded as incongruous

as the 'Monty' and 'Winston' china bulldogs looked on the front room mantelpiece of a man not yet out of his mid-thirties. But it's still an interesting word, 'serenity', with a resonance in both meaning and sound. It was hardly the kind of word which Dugmore would have plucked randomly out of his lexicon of sado-masochism and so I wondered about the meaning he might attach to 'serenity'.

Within the welter of my paranoia, I remembered that I had once read a book about boxing called *Serenity*. It was written by Ralph Wiley, a black American journalist, and while not being a particularly good book it conveyed the sense that serenity can sometimes emerge in times of the most terrible stress and amongst people who confront frightening forces both within themselves and their violent opponents. The time when a boxer is at work in a ring against a formidable fighter bent on destroying him is an experience which would harm the rest of us, psychologically as much as physically. But, inside that square of rope, the best boxers exude a type of serenity – they, the great ones, are the calculating calm at the centre of professional boxing's tumult.

Of course it's a romantic perception; but it was already clear that Dugmore's sexual preference was streaked with abundant lashings of both romanticism and sentimentality, even if they were subject to more twists than your average corkscrew. So continuing our halting conversation, I asked Dugmore about *Serenity*, the book, and he confirmed that he had read 'bits of it'. He thought that its fundamental idea was 'crucial'. The only time he felt 'serene', Dugmore stressed, was when he was at work in the gym or, especially, after a fight with one of his 'mates', which I assumed to be the day's chosen euphemism for prostitutes.

He spoke also about the times he went to the old boxing gymnasium in King's Cross to watch the professionals at work before a big fight. He saw serenity there too, in the rituals of rope-skipping and bag-punching and sparring and shadow-boxing. Boxing then loses itself in a world of its

own. Enclosed within its boundaries of stark violence and pain, boxing retains rules and myths which sustain the fighters themselves.

But, really, I hadn't intended travelling all the way to this dingy street in Borough to philosophize about boxing. This was supposed to have been a journey into the least charted waters of sado-masochistic prostitution. Yet Dugmore, already a step ahead of me, brought matters to a head as if he too had had enough of the verbal sparring. I could come around the next afternoon, at three, if I wanted to see him and 'a mate in action down here, in the gym'. I'd see everything for myself then, he said coldly, ensuring that the intimacy we had shared earlier was now redundant.

He hustled me to the door and I was back on the blustery street with hardly a snatched 'goodbye' from either of us. As I walked slowly to the underground, my mind spinning with Dugmore's talk of 'serenity', I felt my fear climbing again. I knew that tomorrow would be different, tomorrow would be far worse, tomorrow would be another step closer to that 'street', in prostitution, which I sought with such dread. I wished then that that time would never come.

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But of course it did come, bang on time. Even though I had woken the next morning resolved that I would not return to Dugmore, by the time two o'clock came around I felt calm, dare I even say 'serene'? I felt ready for whatever might await with Dugmore and his ubiquitous 'mate' in their Borough cellar.

I arrived at the council block shortly after three, to find Dugmore and an imposing skinhead sunning themselves on the brick wall at the front of the building. The sunshine was gentle but, without the wind of the previous day, it lent some warmth to the afternoon. They both sat silently on the wall, looking up at me when I said my nervous 'hellos'. Without a word, Dugmore stood up and guided me towards the basement entrance. It looked as though it was going to be

another of those unsettling days of silence and stalled conversation.

The young skinhead stood up and followed us into the flat. It was only after we had walked through the front room and kitchen, down the wooden staircase, and stood once more beneath the gym's glaring light that Dugmore spoke. 'This is Vince,' he said quietly, nodding to the skinhead who looked vacantly back at me. I stuck out my head but shakily returned it to my coat pocket when Dugmore said curtly, 'He knows who you are, he knows why you're here.'

It was quiet again, save for the sound of Dugmore and the skinhead removing their tracksuit tops and then bandaging each other's hands in traditional boxing fashion so that the knuckles were completely covered. Then, the gloves were pulled on and I was told to tie their laces. They climbed through the ropes and moved inside the blue canvas ring. Without another word to me they began to circle each other, waiting for the first punch to be thrown.

Dugmore appeared fit and well but he lacked the skinhead's rippling strength. Vince looked hard and cruel and primed to do much damage. As if from nowhere, I began to breathe in that familiar oniony tang which I noticed for the first time that day.

When I think back to that time it is suffused with desolation; but then it felt like I was being burnt with horror. Who were these crazy fuckers? Why were they so silent and so purposeful as they prepared to fight? What in the name of paid fuck was I doing here? Yet, instead of walking out there and then, I took off my coat and sat down weakly on the wooden beam Dugmore used for his sit-up routine.

Their circling inside the ring was broken by Vince moving forward, cutting off Dugmore in the one corner. He sank two straight jabs into Dugmore's face. They were rock-solid punches. Vince had clearly boxed before. Dugmore smiled at his mate and stuck out a jab of his own which brushed the ducking skinhead bristles. Again they circled and then there was a flurry of action as Dugmore connected with a

right to the chin before he was sent backwards by a crisp left-right combination. The smile surfaced once more. Vince did not seem to notice, being more intent on throwing leather at Dugmore's head.

Dugmore himself was not a total novice. He knew how to slip a punch and he occasionally used a kind of bobbing and weaving style to try and confuse Vince. They fought like this for what seemed an age, although it was probably little longer than seven or eight minutes. Vince was undoubtedly the more experienced fighter but Dugmore was managing to avoid undue punishment. I even started to relax slightly, thinking that this might turn out to be a vaguely civilized workout by two mustard-keen boxing enthusiasts.

But I was worried by the fact that they were not taking the traditional break after every three minutes of sparring. They just kept fighting and my anxiety returned when I heard the whispering, gasping sound Dugmore then made whenever Vince hit him. The skinhead had switched his attack to the body and he was being allowed to hit more freely. Dugmore still circled away whenever an attack from Vince was particularly intense but he himself was hardly using his jab any more. It looked as if was allowing himself to be hit, as if he was abandoning himself to severe punishment.

Their shoes made a scraping noise on the canvas but this was gradually drowned out by the sound hissing its way out of Dugmore's gaping, bloodied mouth. It sounded like the muffled screaming of a baby. Dugmore swayed in the centre of the ring, his arms at his side, breathing heavily, in between emitting those deadened cries. Vince stepped back a moment, his face all shiny with sweat and cold intent. As if this was a prearranged signal, Dugmore pawed pathetically at him, gesturing him to 'come on, come in'.

And then it began, a much more terrible fight in which only one man, Vince, was punching and kicking. The other, Dugmore, sagged beneath the rain of blows as if in sad imitation of a tree about to break apart at the height of a

storm. Vince clubbed him across the head and face with heavy punches and kicked him in the stomach and along the flanks with his hob-nailed boots. Dugmore's cries had softened into a whimpering murmur – but it was impossible to hear what he was saying amid the thud of fists and feet sinking into flesh and bone.

This second phase of the fight could not have gone on for more than ten, maybe fifteen seconds. All I can remember is that I was suddenly shouting – probably nothing more than 'Stop it', but with a feeling of such despair that even now I cannot define it. At least they did stop soon after, for Dugmore sank briefly to his knees before rising unsteadily to embrace Vince. He hung onto the skinhead long enough for blood to spill from his mouth onto the bright blue of the canvas. They parted with a kiss, which mattered more to Dugmore than Vince.

Vince climbed down from the ring, wiped Dugmore's blood from his mouth, unfastened his gloves with his teeth and removed the bandages from his hands with dexterity. Dugmore then looked at me from across the set of ropes. 'Want a round or two?' he smiled, with his face looking bloodied and gaunt beneath the blazing light. I looked away.

'Ah well, maybe next time,' Dugmore sighed, as he climbed gingerly through the ropes. By the time he had removed his own gloves, Vince was standing at the cellar door staring back at us with ill-concealed disdain.

'My money,' he said simply.

Dugmore laughed quietly, as if to himself, and went over to the far corner where his hooded tracksuit top lay. He reached into the pocket and took out two £20 notes. A trace of blood slipped from his nose onto the head of the Queen and so he brushed the note carefully on the leg of his trousers before handing it to Vince who pocketed it and turned to climb the stairs in one fluid movement. Dugmore followed him up, as I did a minute later, just in time to hear the front door close behind Vince.

The fighting, at least, was finally over. Dugmore came

back into the kitchen and, as though nothing had happened in the last quarter hour, switched on the kettle and removed two cups and a packet of chocolate Hobnob biscuits from the cupboard. He then poured cold water into the sink and washed away the blood from his nose and mouth and splashed himself all over in an impromptu half-shower. He used a faded Edinburgh Tattoo tea-towel to dry himself. The whole voiceless process was over by the time the kettle had boiled.

Dugmore sat down then, poured us each a cup of tea, offered me a Hobnob which I dazedly refused, and bit cheerfully into the one he'd picked out for himself. He looked bright but calm; yes, he did look serene. He was ready to talk and this time it was me who was stalling for time as I tried to still some befuddled emotions.

I had to bite down hard on the nausea that was threatening to move up from the pit of my gut. But, after two cups of tea, I finally reached for the tape-recorder and, for the first time, we began to talk, face to face – the surface difference between us being that my face was streaked with lines of distress while Dugmore's appeared smooth and miraculously unmarked from the beating he'd just suffered.

Dugmore stressed his belief that I should feel privileged to have seen him 'at work in the ring with Vince'. The session I had just seen, however, had merely been an 'easy workout'. It was held more for my interest than Dugmore's own desire. If I had not been there they would have 'gone a whole lot further, in every kind of way'. This explained why Dugmore did not feel 'quite as serene as usual' for, compared with a more typical fight-date with Vince, he had not suffered from any kind of beating that day. It had been 'nothing' – all I had seen was a 'couple of cuffs round the ears'. If they had really gone for it, as they'd have done if the circumstances had not been so artificial, they would have fought in nothing but jockstraps and the fighting would have lasted for anything up to an hour. Then, 'with his juices

flowing', Vince was ruthless and, afterwards, Dugmore would be unable to move without pain for at least a week. But he would feel cleansed, purified even. He would be, obviously, serene.

Dugmore admitted that he had found it 'strangely stimulating' to have their session, however unconsummated by 'real' violence it had remained, watched by a third person. I was unable to claim even a shred of such pleasure. It took virtually all my concentration to keep myself from spewing all over Dugmore's cherished packet of Hobnobs.

Vince, Dugmore continued, was a prostitute and had been to the flat many times. They had first met when he still worked at 'Pumps'. I made a surly mental note to ask Howard why he employed thugs as curt as Vince. But Howard, or that 'fucking fop of a fag' as Dugmore then described him, had already parted company with Vince.

Although he had at one time been the most popular bondage boot-boy at 'Pumps', Vince's violence became uncontrollable. Vince hated faggots, said Dugmore with an ironic touch of glee in his voice, and after a while he hardly knew when to stop during a session with some of Howard's middle-aged, masochistic clients. But they had neither any understanding nor any kind of decent tolerance level when it came to dealing with pain. Dugmore apparently knew the types well; they were, he insisted, the old public-school fags who yearned to be punished for their lives of flabby excess but lacked the bottle to accept the hurt they deserved.

'It's just a plaything to them faggots,' maintained the still serene Dugmore as he tucked into his third Hobnob on the trot. 'They want to be spanked on their wobbly pink bottoms but they're just not able to accept anything like true pain. They'd just fold up and beg for mercy when Vince hit 'em with his fists. They're pathetic – they can never know nothing about serenity.'

As someone just as likely to 'fold up' beneath Vince's effective fists, I doubted that I could share Dugmore's grasp of our venerable 'serenity' theme. But I kept this observation

to myself, not wishing to divert him unduly. For the moment, at least, my pugilistic chat of the previous day still held good and Dugmore remained happy to offer his insight into the saga of the weak-minded businessmen whose desire for bondage went sour in the face of the angrily homophobic Vince.

Even though Vince could have earned both himself and Howard wads of cash if he had kept his rage in check, he had to be removed from the 'Pumps' list of working boys after he broke the nose of an eminent executive during an especially heated S&M session. He had of course broken Dugmore's own nose a couple of times before that incident.

But then he and Vince had respect for each other, Dugmore affirmed, for 'It comes with fighting, don't it? Broken noses, cut lips, bruised faces, it's all part an' parcel of the scene, innit? Y'know, with S&M or whatever you want to call it. We know that, me and Vince. We're both fighters. He's something of a kick-boxer while I'm more a traditionalist, you know, a plain old scrubber in the ring with a great big love for fighting. The first time I set eyes on Vince down at "Pumps" he stood apart from the rest. A fighter all right – he's no fag, I said to myself, when I took a look at him. He has fury in him.

'I knew I'd have to fight him, over and over. That was more than a year ago – and it's 'cos of Vince that I built the gym, with the ring an' all. The first time we just fought in the front room, cleared away everything but that's not the proper way to do it – you just end up smashing things. So now we do it in the gym downstairs, a couple of times a month.

'Since Vince left "Pumps" he's been a lot more focused. He's really fighting now, not having to fuck around all those middle-class poofs. He sees me and a couple of other guys still but he's also earning money as a fighter – you know, bare-knuckle fights and kick-boxing and things like that. You should see that boy fight. He's awesome. Saw him smash up this big tattooed fucker a few weeks ago, at the

back of a churchyard in Hackney. The guy didn't get up – his people had to take him to hospital. That's Vince for you – lethal with his fists and his feet. And I should know – after all, working out on me helps keep him in trim.'

Ever since I had spoken to him on the phone two nights before, I had been confused by Dugmore's rampant homophobia. He professed loathing for Howard and *all* homosexuals. They were 'fops and fags – scum really', the lot of them, and yet Dugmore himself paid money to Vince, a homophobic prostitute for masochistic homosexuals. Howard had also made it clear that when Dugmore requested skinhead boot-boys from 'Pumps' he always wanted a 'severe session' of S&M to end in oral sex.

This conversation was becoming stranger by the minute and, falling into that feared position of losing control of the interview, I asked Dugmore a straight question. Why did he so hate homosexuals when he himself was gay, albeit of a particularly masochistic or, as he put it, 'serene type' of sexuality?

Dugmore pushed his cup angrily across the table at me, as if this was a more telling rebuke than any words he could possibly summon. He was seething, as the recurring backdrop of sullen silence testified. It might have been the time for me to offer soothing words but Dugmore had disturbed me deeply those last few days; and so I said nothing to placate his resentment.

I found some base pleasure in the thought that I had splintered the lie of his 'serenity'. If I had learnt nothing else during my first year of prostitution writing, I had discovered that the whole enterprise was sustained as much by personal mythology as by the more timeworn desire for money.

I felt unable to pander any longer to Dugmore's deceptive reverie and he, in turn, was not going to deign my impertinence with a serious reply. Finally, Dugmore suggested quietly that I should leave for I clearly had 'no interest in anything but muck-raking'. For the second time

in more than a year of interviews I had struck out (as with Alistair) and I saw no way of saving the situation. Anyway, I thought dejectedly as Dugmore and I brusquely shook hands at his front door, what did an interview matter when set against the overwhelming bleakness of this man's life.

I saw scant light in the sadism and masochism I had witnessed that day. What possible meaning could be found in maintaining my links with such an incomprehensible situation except for the fact that it might prove that *I* was either a sadist, for watching such pain, or a masochist, for putting myself through such defilement. Convinced I was neither I took my leave of Colin Dugmore, certain that I would never set eyes on him again.

A week passed, and then another. As much as I tried to purge myself of them, sombre images of Dugmore and Vince reeled through my head. They became entwined with repeated memories of what I had meant to do when I naively set out on my absurd quest for 'the street' in prostitution. I had not felt any anger towards the men who had nailed themselves to their phallic crosses and yet with Dugmore, whose 'perversion' was comparatively mild, I had lost control. I should have moved more slowly with him, I should not have gone there to judge him – especially when I knew so little about him. On and on the contradictions raged until, for some reason I could not fully fathom at the time, I spoke to Michel, the 'Benoni Boy', about what I had seen in Borough.

As a connoisseur of prostitution he listened, with both ironic amusement and compassionate interest. The scene was easy for him to imagine and he laughed a little at the ridiculous thought of me and Dugmore smouldering over his chocolate Hobnobs. He did not tell me what to do; rather, he asked simply when I thought I'd go back. He knew, before me, that this was what I had to do, seeing that

I had already moved so far from his more tender world of prostitution.

When I phoned him that night, Dugmore was astonishingly amiable. Apparently, like Michel, he had little doubt that I would be back. He had been wondering, just a few hours before, when I would call him. It was as if nothing had happened between us. He invited me to come round the next afternoon and was only momentarily taken aback when I said that I would prefer to see him alone – without Vince. But that too did not cause a problem. It would just be me and him, he stressed, and we'd talk for as long as I needed.

Despite his assurances, I arrived in Borough the next day as unsure of what to expect as before my two previous visits. But a different kind of Dugmore opened the door with a smile and a couple of banal, but deeply reassuring snippets of small talk. The weather was still crappily changeable, he burbled, but he was back at work again and 'enjoying being out and about'. It suddenly occurred to me that I had never before thought seriously about Dugmore in conventional terms. He had always just been the 'disturbed, prostitute-paying, homophobic masochist'.

But Dugmore did have another life outside of boxing, the gym and Vince. He worked as a washing-machine engineer for a 'reputable company' – I thought then that I would look more closely the next time a repair man arrived at the door to solve the latest spin-dryer conundrum. He laughed when I told him that Docherty always said he would impersonate a washing-machine engineer if interrupted in his work by an irate husband. He also smiled when I asked him what his clients thought when he turned up at their door to fix their machine and they were confronted with a face which had just been hammered by Vince.

This was the reason he went to a professional prostitute, and fighter, like Vince, he emphasized. When they fought, most of the damage was 'done downstairs', to his body, and so he could hide the bruises and cuts from questioning eyes.

It was only on the most rare, 'horny occasions that things get out of control and my nose gets bust or something – and there's always an excuse to be found for a broken hooter, isn't there?'

We were off to a flying start this time, Dugmore and I, and he even seemed pleased when I asked him if he would mind talking about his early life. 'Not at all, mate, not at all.' Although I was still anxious enough to wonder if the 'mate' reference might be some obscure allusion to Vince suddenly popping up out of nowhere, I pushed down the record button and listened to Dugmore.

'I've told you a little about my parents already. We weren't really close. My mother – she was a small woman, didn't say much except to moan that her work was never done and that we, my father and I, did nothing about the house but dirty it. I often wondered what she thought when she was quiet. Not much probably. She had no real passion, no real life even – when I think of her now it's like all the colour had drained out of her, like an old cloth round the house, like this one here . . .'

As Dugmore looked meaningfully at the worn Edinburgh Tattoo tea-towel, my mind ran amok on a labyrinthine tour of the psychological dents which must surely reside in this colourless cloth metaphor. Perhaps Dugmore imagined, when he wiped away the blood from his battered body after every battle with Vince, that the tea-towel *was actually his mother*? Or maybe he punished himself for her drab existence by forcing himself to suffer such heightened stretches of pain? I even began to wonder if I hadn't stumbled onto the holy shroud of sado-masochism in this wretched tea-towel. Even the Edinburgh *Tattoo* symbol seemed inflated with significance. Hadn't Dugmore mentioned previously that he was planning to have a weeping red rose, surrounded by thorns, tattooed onto his chest above the words – 'no pain, no gain'? That was pretty interesting fodder for the randomly amateur psychologist. Tell us about your dad then, Dugmore.

'My dad – he was an odd man. A bitter man, I think. Life never turned out the way he thought it would. He was quite old when I was born – forty maybe. I don't honestly know if I can say it made much difference to him that I was around. He wasn't bad to me or anything, although he lost his temper with me once or twice. Gave me a real thrashing a couple of times – but he would always give me some extra pocket money the next day so we'd have no real hard feelings, you know.'

The Freudian circle appeared to be tightening. Surely there were flashing warning lights in all these 'real thrashing' admissions? Despite my better intentions I was close to hallucinating further revelatory details of this ghostly childhood. Dugmore was even beginning to sound like he had lived a similar early life to Kafka, under the loveless shadow of a formidable father. Now all that was left for me was to work out why he had chosen to dabble in serious S&M instead of simply watching a 'Gregor Samsa'-starring video like *Surf Butt Bandits* or writing Borough's equivalent of *Metamorphosis*.

But Dugmore would have none of it, fortunately, and he swiftly set me right. 'Now I can see what you're thinking, mate, and you're wrong. Maybe there was never no great love in this house but there wasn't much hate either. They looked after me all right, my parents. We were like most families from round here. Disappointments, failures, no real chances, no real privileges or anything. But there was security and a home and acceptance too. It was comfortable in a way. I knew who my mum and dad were. I knew their shortcomings but I never hated or disrespected them. That was it.

'You shouldn't go round trying to find mischief in the past when that past is dead ordinary. I can say that the only thing that got to me was the boredom of our lives. But it wasn't that bad – I'm still here, aren't I? I haven't left this house, it's still home. So shut off all those theories you're trying to cook up – they just won't wash.'

Despite the domestic symbolism, I had to admit that Dugmore's veneer of common-sense simplicity was not without substance. But, still, I pressed on. What about the front room, buried as it was in the past? Did that not prove that the repressed secrets of Dugmore's present life were swamped in the history of his parents?

'No, no, mate, you're getting all pretentious now. There's no secret about it. I'm just lazy. I've left things the way they are 'cos I can't be bothered about buying new knick-knacks. I'm not interested in ornaments or pictures on the wall. I don't feel dominated by the past at all – I can see that that's what you want me to say. But I'm not having it. If you want to ask me *why* I fight with a mean fucker like Vince I'll tell it to you true and simple – I like fighting. You know how I love boxing.

'And that's the only link I'll give in to. My dad – he was a boxer. A good amateur by all accounts but he fell out of love with the game after his accident with the train. He never spoke to me much about boxing and, anyway, I only really got interested in it seriously after he died. I've only been training and following fights closely for the last ten years.'

Still longing to trace some psychological bridge between repression and guilt, I leapt into the murky depths of Dugmore's most obvious frailty. Did his father know anything of his masochistic cravings, of the homosexuality they veiled?

He took the bluntness of the question relatively well, as if it was a thudding straight right which hurt, but did not drop him. After a few seconds of stunned, head-shaking silence he recovered his composure.

'You're just trying to stick this tag on me, aren't you? "Homosexual"? Is that what I am to you? *That* word? I thought your eyes were open to things other than that.'

A lot of people pinned their whole identity on that word, or at least on its 'gay' variant, I answered. Didn't it matter to him that some people invested all their pride into the

concept of a 'gay' identity? Why did he hate, or fear, the word so much?

'I don't fear it,' he said softly. 'I just don't want to be called that only. There's more to me than that. Should I just call you "straight" and say nothing about the fact that you're a writer, that you're from South Africa, that you're some clever kind of fucker. Hey? Answer that – is that just who you are? A boring old straight?'

Although he might not have been that far from what Alistair would have called 'a fundamental truth', I couldn't let Dugmore gloss over the extremity of his innately bruised sexuality. It was as if he wished his relationship with Vince to appear analogous to the kind of 'straight behaviour' which centres around much simpler desires and dreams. But we were fast approaching another of our stalemates and so I returned, without much hope, to the original question. I asked more euphemistically if his father knew anything about his private life.

After a long, thoughtful silence he replied. His voice was steady even though his hands shook slightly and he had to put his cup to rest in its saucer. 'Yes, I think perhaps he guessed something. He never said anything but then he never would have. I never brought any girls home and my mother made the odd comment about me keeping too much to myself. But that was all. They didn't hound me about not having girlfriends. They were decent, most of the time.

'I was never a poof or anything but I knew I liked close combat, physically dealing with another guy. I guess there was some sexual thing deep down but, then, I just thought of it as wrestling. I used to wrestle with this one mate of mine, Tommy. We wrestled a lot and then, one Sunday, when my mum and dad went to the cemetery, to put some flowers on my nan's grave, me and Tommy decided we'd wrestle in the nude. You know, sort of like those Greek gladiators. We used oil and everything. It was exciting and we fought hard – for a long time – until the door to my room suddenly opened and my father was standing there,

looking at us. I went cold. My father said nothing, he just closed the door and went downstairs. He didn't say a word all evening.

'I never did see Tommy after that. I moved out a month or so later – went to stay in Brixton. But I still came home on weekends; it was no big deal me moving out, it had been planned for months before. I'd have preferred it if my dad hadn't seen us but that's all he saw – he knew nothing about anything else. Anyway, it's only since I've been back here that I've paid people like Vince. They're not to know now are they, my mum and dad, them being dead and all.'

Stripped down to this level, words transcribed onto paper, Dugmore's story might seem shabbily pathetic but then, hearing his voice recounting this personal history, it was curiously affecting. Dugmore spoke clearly, but still with some difficulty, almost as if he was actually learning to feel and then say these words together for the very first time in his life – which, apparently, was the actual case.

'I've never told anyone that before – wonder why I'm telling a strange cunt like you?' he concluded as a way of covering the embarrassment he suddenly felt as his eyes misted over. I wanted to give Dugmore some kind of affectionate punch on his shoulder but, against the corrosive S&M backdrop, it hardly seemed appropriate. And I guess I have my own personal hang-up when it comes to saying to another man, 'Don't cry, please don't cry . . .'

Instead, Dugmore blew his nose noisily in the front room next door. On his return to the kitchen we opted for more tea. Feeling some empathy with Dugmore, I admitted that I had been profoundly troubled by the sight of him lowering his hands a few weeks before so that Vince could pile into him with gluttonous ferocity. Did it not bother him too that he had to seek pleasure in such terrible beatings? Was he not troubled by the 'penis and nail' desires of the jailed 'Spanner' group? Did he not fear a fate befalling him similar to that which ended the lives of John Hudspith and Murray Erskine?

'I knew all of those guys. Hudspith and Erskine, vaguely, at that [gay] boxing and wrestling club, before they died. But they were very different to me. They were banker types, from the city. Then these others, these guys in jail! They have to simply hate themselves to do such awful things. I mean, they're complete perverts – fuck-ups. I have nothing to do with that sort of stuff. They're scum, with their wooden blocks and whips.'

Dugmore was adept at contradicting himself. Was 'scum' not the word he used to describe the 'middle class faggots' who had no idea how to deal with pain? When it came to enduring, and even understanding, pain there were surely few men either as 'tough' or 'fearless' as the submissive members of the 'obscenity' circle? What mattered most to him – the ability to withstand pain or the sensible avoidance of torture?

'I dunno. I guess it's getting confusing; but there is a big difference between me and these others. I'm in the middle, if you like. On the one hand you've got the old boy network who like to dress up and aren't really able to take any form of pain. They want the trimmings but none of the substance of S&M. Then you get the other lot, the complete nutters. I once answered one of Lasky's S&M ads. It was in one of those personal contact sex directory mags. And I met some of those guys but when I heard the type of things they did – burning and branding and nailing – I stayed well clear. If you look at these two separate camps in S&M it just comes down to degrading yourself. There's no dignity, not like you find in boxing.'

Before I could question him as to where the 'dignity' was to be found in the batterings he forced himself to endure, Dugmore continued: 'This is why Vince is so important to me. We do box, in a ring with gloves, in the proper way. We do actually fight. I land blows on him. It starts out being a fair contest. As you saw – I kept him at bay for maybe ten minutes. But then his superiority takes its toll. He's a supreme fighter. He's ruthless. And there's something beautiful in that.'

My snort of disbelief did not bother Dugmore. 'You're the one who's being illogical, mate. You like boxing, you wrote about a "soiled beauty" in boxing? Someone like Dempsey, someone like Duran, someone like Tyson – all of them were ruthless in their prime. You admired them as fighters if not always as people . . .'

Dugmore had caught me out with one of the many contradictions spearing my interest in boxing but, still, there was a monstrous chasm between professional fighters and someone like Vince. And, more importantly, the raw ring-fury of the likes of Dempsey, Duran and Tyson had always been under the control of a referee. Tyson, after all, defeated himself outside the ring when there was no referee to pull him off an eighteen-year-old girl. So who would be there to pull Vince away when the beating reached its deadliest pitch?

'But there *is* control in Vince, like there's control in all great fighters. Remember the serenity we spoke about last time. When Vince starts to take over the fight and I feel myself succumbing I look into his face and it's smooth, it's serene. He's just going about his job. And I lose myself then. I don't feel the pain so much as the bliss of letting go. The fists and boots are flashing into me and I see strange kind of colours and I feel light and then it's over and I suck him off 'til he shoots and I feel clean, I feel serene, it's the best feeling in the whole fucking world . . .'

Colin Dugmore strove for something mystical in his evocation of serenity, though it filled me with nothing but desolation. We got drunk that day, drinking wine and then tequila late into the night. Dugmore found some kind of release in talking and there was little stopping him as he connected his enigmatic circles of pain and pleasure, violence and serenity. I listened not so long ago to the tapes we recorded that night and it is me who subsides into silence while Dugmore becomes increasingly lyrical.

We parted that night, although warmed by the drink and

the hours we had spent together, as far apart as we had ever been. Without the convenience of any obvious 'explanation' in his childhood or present life for his brutally submissive sexual desires, I left his home soured by pessimism. If there was no clear 'cause' where was the 'cure'? Dugmore would have found my thinking to be typically reductive but where was the room for expansive thought in such an emotional wasteland? As always, I left that Borough basement flat with multiple questions and few answers.

When you are faced with the inexplicable, you are always told, there is nothing to do but to accept the mystery. But, still, I could not accept *this*. We saw each other a few times more without coming any closer to the 'truth' I so yearned to find. Dugmore even went to the National Film Theatre, to see Robert Bresson's *A Man Escaped* and *L'Argent*, resplendent with their austere themes of repression, refusal and a subsequent discovery of spirituality. He did this, I think, as some kind of 'favour' to me for I had mentioned in passing to him that he might find them to be 'gravely serene'. But Bresson was boring, he said – although he did have the grace to admit that he'd 'never been one for sub-titles at the movies'.

He invited me to go with him the following Sunday morning to watch Vince fight. I said I would go – perhaps, in a perverse kind of way, for the same sort of reason he went to the Bresson films. I knew by now that Dugmore was hopelessly in love with Vince and yet it was a love thick with delusion.

I had met Vince two nights before, mainly at Dugmore's instigation in a pub in New Cross. Vince was there with his father and two brothers, similarly mean-looking men. He explained curtly that Dugmore had paid him £30 to talk to me and so I could have fifteen minutes of his time in the far corner of the pub.

To be so close to Vince, looking at him straight in the face, hearing the venom in each of his answers, was to have one's face ground into something that felt and smelt and

looked like nothing but evil. There was the certainty, within such fearful melodrama, that some people are just bad, for whatever reason, and they care about little but the extremities of hurt and humiliation they can cause.

No tape-recorder rolled that night. Vince had said he'd smash my face in if he caught me taping. I believed him and so his words are nowhere to be heard but in my own memory. And it hardly matters for they were really not worth hearing, comprising sneering boasts and threats. He scared me but, strangely enough, I found some of Dugmore's famed serenity under fire and I went the course with Vince, asking questions and looking him in the face whenever he shot his scourge of a stare my way. The rest of the time I prayed to escape as he boasted that he was moving beyond prostitution – it had just been a phase, 'a way to beat the shit out of fags and get paid', something he had stumbled into for 'a crack'.

He was already deep in the world of illegal prize-fighting. He'd fight anyone and anything. He was even considering taking on a pit-bull terrier for £1,000, 'just like that geezer in the *News of the World*,' said Vince in reference to the story which followed Sara Dale's clash with Chris Blythe and Norman Lamont. He had videos of the dog savaging other fighters but he had seen a way to break its neck before the jaws severed your arm-muscles. As for Dugmore, he was pathetic, and he would surely die beneath Vince's fists one day. That's what Dugmore wanted, to be destroyed, and he, Vince, was going to do it. 'Scum like him,' said Vince without any awareness of the irony in his choice of word, 'aren't fit to live.'

In a moment of sheer lunacy I, obviously shell-shocked, asked Vince why he allowed Dugmore to end each session with a blow job if he so hated the man. I remember little about the next few moments except that Vince had me by the throat, like I was a warm-up for the pit-bull, and I could feel myself just about pissing in my pants. He hissed terrifyingly in my face and I got ready to die. Unlike

Dugmore, I recall nothing serene in Vince's face as he hurt me. But someone pulled him off and told him not to waste time with a wanker like me which, then, were the sweetest words I'd ever heard.

I never actually saw Vince fight again. I caught a bus and walked with Colin Dugmore to a deserted warehouse in Hackney that following Sunday morning, with mizzle curling through the streets like Dickensian fog. It was an ominous sight at the edge of the parking lot where thirty or more men had gathered. In the distance I could see Vince and, a little way from him, the huge black man he was soon to fight. Dugmore shared my despair; perhaps even he had begun to sense that Vince hated, rather than 'respected' him.

He just nodded sadly when I said I really did not want to see that fight. I wanted to leave, never to see such violence so close up again. I turned away and, for the first time that day, I felt a loosening of my heart. Dugmore called after me, 'Wait, I'll come with you. I'm not in the mood for this either.'

As much as I would love to end at that point, as if this were fiction and redemption could be seen to flower, it has to be said that Colin Dugmore did not give up searching for serenity beneath the fists and feet of his once loved Vince. The last time I saw him, back at the onion-ringed basement flat, he was damaged 'both up and downstairs'. Vince had opened up cuts beneath both of Dugmore's puffed-up eyes, split his upper lip, cracked his jaw, broken two ribs and weakened a kidney. Even a week after their 'fight', Dugmore looked in need of hospitalization – a remedy of mine which he angrily denied.

He was depressed and said that part of the problem was that talking to me had disrupted his equilibrium, it had reduced his serenity. He was thinking thoughts that had not troubled him before. Reflection, he insisted, was not a good thing; he did not want to examine everything about his life as if it was fatally flawed.

So Dugmore asked me, with telling candour, if I had what

I needed from him. I replied that, yes, he had shown me things I knew existed but had never witnessed before; but, I continued more urgently, I was worried more about him than the 'character' he would appear as in this book.

Although I could not really have expected him to, he said he believed me and that I had shown him another side of life, especially with those boring French films. It had been mildly interesting but he did not want my help or my pity. He wanted a way back into serenity, into the serenity of submission.

I left, as he requested. When I tried to contact him a few months later I learnt from his neighbour that, just like Jackie, he had disappeared. 'Gone, he's just gone, mate – left one day with his suitcase and there's been neither hide nor hair of him since.'

Chapter Twelve

Telephone Booth Charmers

That excursion to Borough had lasted for six long weeks. I had felt the same emptiness when I left townships like Soweto and Sebokeng in South Africa where people had been shot and hacked and burnt to death. But that violence, fatal as it was, had been intrinsically political. Although the catastrophe of those deaths remained unaltered, it was possible still to dream of a better country emerging one day, of a mythological 'new' South Africa.

I cared much more about the violence in my own country than that administered in the name of sado-masochistic sex in London. And yet I had come to feel concern for people like Dugmore, broken as he was by his own private desolation. That compassion was sharpened further by my own personal perplexity. I knew why people were suffering and dying in South Africa as that injustice remained in an ideological framework which, for all its anguish, was still comprehensible. In contrast, the pain sought by Colin Dugmore, Murray Erskine, John Hudspith and all those jailed at the Old Bailey trial defeated me.

There was even a time when I considered ending this writing but, then, another set of words set me thinking. Although indisputably squalid, the singular prostitution text found in most central London telephone booths eventually got me working again. After Borough and boxing it was time to return to basics. I started to walk in and out of many

telephone booths during the next few weeks. The cards inside helped me forget Vince for a while.

'Call Girl' was, of course, the definitive euphemism for prostitute from the 1950s to the late 1970s. Although it's now been superseded by the equally trite 'escort' and 'masseuse' tags, the semantic source of the 'call girl' name is no less applicable today than it was thirty years ago. Being first and foremost a business, it's inevitable that prostitution's primary contact point is not so much the street corner as the telephone.

'Girls' still wait today for their clients to 'call' but the telephone, unlike say, in the mid-1950s, is now available to virtually all but the homeless. In its hey-day, 'call girl' defined the upper-end of the market where only the more 'exclusive' prostitutes worked, with a phone, from the privacy of a flat. The rest of the 'working women', the vast majority of whom did not have access to a personal telephone number, had to operate a starker form of advertising – standing on a corner, somewhere, they fulfilled their 'street girls' description.

This traditional street form of prostitution continues to be active. The telephone, however, if not this country at large, has become relatively 'classless'. As the telephone has been appropriated by the prostitution 'proletariat', to extend an awkward metaphor of class, the 'call girl' term has faded from popular usage. The distinction now is not between 'call girls' and 'street girls' but between the varying routes of advertizing used by the diverse groups of prostitutes.

Although a city like Amsterdam has accepted and refined prostitution to the point where it is opened up for all those who wish to see it, in one particular district, the British have always been more deeply secretive. If you're a prostitute in Amsterdam or Hamburg you don't have to think that much about places to advertize – the clients know where to find you. In London, however, especially since the reinvention of Soho, there's no equivalent day-time district of

prostitution. Here, prostitutes have virtually all become 'telephone girls'.

Hundreds of their telephone numbers fill up the 'Personal Columns' of London's twelve 'neighbourhood' papers. Masquerading under those familiar 'escort' and 'massage' buzzwords, with the latter usually appealing to a quicker and cheaper turnover of clients, the women advertized here provide the broad middle-class of telephone prostitution.

But, as testified by the ever-expanding use of personalized cards, the favourite advertizing slot of the more populist London prostitute is now, far and away, British Telecom's redesigned telephone booth. They have become sites of exotically-coded sexual sale where information, with definitive Nineties consumerism, is presented to the reader in a breathlessly competitive and compacted style. Even the five-second attention-span is not overtly taxed here – as confirmed by my first sample of pseudonyms, taken from three phone booths down the road from the Notting Hill tube: 'Enema Lady – Complete Clean Out By Busty Ex-Nurse'; 'Jolene – My Red Hot Bottom Needs Spanking'; 'Dominatrix Bitch – Dare You Call?'; 'Lisa, 18-year-old schoolgirl – O and A Level Satisfaction'; 'Madame Sin – *Whip* Cream Delight'; 'Miss Whipslut – Punishment Guaranteed'; 'Monica – Big, Beautiful Swedish Girl With 50″ Chest For Sale'; 'Charm – Caribbean Beauty'.

After my recent S&M escapades, that relentlessly colourful list was at least halved when it came to making initial contact with one of those telephone lovelies. 'Jolene', 'Dominatrix Bitch', 'Madame Sin' and 'Miss Whipslut' immediately sank to the bottom of the list. Although being an All-Bran munching sort of guy made me think I could get away without having 'a complete clean out', I jotted down 'Enema Lady's' number. Her catchy name had snagged in my brain ever since Alice Teague had mentioned it during our first-ever meeting. But I thought it wise not to immediately 'bottom-out', as they say, with the eccentric-sounding 'ex-nurse'. While I wondered at the eye-boggling

reality of such a large 'Swedish chest', there was no real internal debate about who should receive the dubious pleasure of my first call. For the lyrical, non-specialist sparseness of her ad, 'Charm' was a clear winner. After brooding on hurt and submission, what could have been a more preferable panacea than a lilting conversation with a 'Caribbean Beauty' called, simply and delightfully, 'Charm'? I expected that we might even eventually broaden our chat to cricket and calypso, which would provide a welcome change from boxing and brutality.

My spirits were raised even further when I spoke to Charm herself. I had been expecting to have to fence with an irritable maid at first but Charm, in a voice that was indeed 'lilting', informed me that she liked to have first contact with the clients themselves. When I explained to her that I was not strictly a client and gave her a brief explanation of the reason for my call, she was full of bubbling affability. It would be no problem at all if I just wanted to drop by for a chat, for free, as she was 'very interested in writers and would love to help in any way you need, my sweet'. She enthusiastically suggested that I 'pop over' to her place in Marylebone within the next half-hour. Relieved that I was at last speaking to someone friendly and obviously well-meaning, I promised to be there.

Charm opened the door to her ground-floor flat and, in the murky light of the entrance hall, showed me her flashing white teeth and dread-locked braids – these swung slowly from side to side as she breathed her 'welcome, welcome to "Charm" school' greeting. She was a big woman but she moved with languid grace towards the first door down the passage with a lingering 'follow me, sweetie' glance. I so like women, I thought; I'm so glad that I'm seeing a Caribbean beauty called 'Charm' rather than some sadistic or masochistic male fucker, I hummed to myself.

I must have taken my time following Charm because by the time I entered her room my pleasant meditation was

shattered by the sight, in blazing floodlight, of a formidable-looking black woman stripped to the waist and already undoing her peachy suspender belt and stockings. I think that that was one of those rare times in life when a *gasp* really was required. Where was my innocent, calypso-loving, dreadlock-swaying 'Charm'?

She was there all right, in her full glory – as naked as a new-born babe except for the thick belt she had wrapped round her suddenly muscular-looking forearm.

My complexion must have switched from bright red to deathly pale in a couple of seconds. I sat down hesitantly on the edge of the large satin-sheeted bed. The room had, by now, swum back into focus and everywhere I looked I saw the apparatus and weapons of another bondage queen. There were hooks and chains hanging from the white walls while the floor was covered in wooden and metal contraptions into which, presumably, Charm's clients were either strapped or locked. They, inevitably, did not look like much fun.

Charm's lovely teeth-flashing smile had been replaced by a sweat-inducing sneer. She bobbled her impressively large breasts in front of my face as if they were an enormous pair of pendulums. I felt certain I would have been hypnotized by their to-ing and fro-ing if her voice hadn't cut through my confusion: 'So what are you looking for today, big boy? You want £100 worth of belt, maybe?'

At least she was talking to me again, I soothed myself, which perhaps meant that her butt-naked and bulbulous pendulum performance was merely a quaint Caribbean welcoming custom. I cleared my throat politely and reminded her that, 'Well, actually, I'm the writer, you know, the guy you've just spoken to on the phone. I'm just here to talk . . .'

'I talk with everyone and I talk to no-one,' Charm sighed mystically as she rolled her breasts angrily in my face. Briefly, I was smothered in their clammy clinch. The belt unwound itself from her arm and, starting in slow-motion,

she lifted it above her head and began to flex it like a snake turning its head from side-to-side in that moment just before it strikes. I shrunk instinctively away and covered my face with my hands as the belt came scything down – it flashed a good foot above my head, presumably as a warning, and careered into the opposite wall where it resounded with a demoralizing thwack.

'Man, there's nothing I hate more than that,' seethed the now unfortunately named Charm as the belt came flashing back the other way so that it made an awful whapping sound – the sound, surely, of the wind that blows the fires of hell. There was no wall close enough to halt its flow and the lack of another thwack seemed to infuriate Charm for she brought the belt back above her head and then smashed it down onto the golden bed-post.

'What's that?' I croaked, trying to buy some time before the belt began another journey.

She looked at me a long while, her breasts heaving as she breathed noisily through flaring nostrils. My eyes had even moved upwards to lock into her own pair. They were filmy with wildness. This was, surely '*She – She Who Must Be Obeyed!*' But '*She*' was clearly on some kind of drug-induced bender. The eyes said it all, and I thought – 'I'm facing a large woman driven out of her mind by crack and she wants to kill me. Come back Vince . . .'

'I hate snivelling liars – more than anything,' she raged. 'And that's what you are, isn't it, big boy?'

'No, no, I'm not.'

She made an imposing 'Paaahhh!' exclamation before sending the belt back onto its wall-beating trail. As the echo of its sturdy slap finally softened she launched into hysterical, sobbing laughter. It scared me more than the belt. Finally she calmed herself and said quietly, her breasts once more reacquainting themselves with my sweaty face, 'That's what they all say. They all say they're fucking writers! But we know better, don't we, big boy? You're not a writer at all, man, you're a pathetic creep and you want me to beat

you with this belt 'til you bleed – don't you? That's why you're here, isn't it? And think before you speak this time. Don't lie to me, baby, you know how angry it makes me . . .'

It was a pretty awkward situation, particularly when I remembered that, whatever I said, it would be pronounced in my flat white South African accent. It's not exactly the enunciation you'd choose to have at the best of times, never mind in a situation as potentially explosive as the one Charm had delivered. Somehow I needed to find a soft, ambiguously accented answer which would placate both her sadistic temper and any possible emergence of an ideological doubt about my otherwise impeccable political creed. Gazing fearfully into those glazed eyes, I took a chance on the accent and said as purposefully as possible: 'Please listen to me. I'm not one of your clients. You invited me here to interview you. If there's been some misunderstanding then I'll leave. I'm not here to give you any trouble . . .'

'There's been no misunderstanding, big boy. Give me £100 and take all your clothes off. I want your money and I want you naked! *NOW!* – or else there will be real trouble, trouble like you've never seen before!'

The belt was held in abeyance this time but I could see it twitching impatiently in her hand – ready to move into action at any moment. After Vince and Dugmore that was the worst thing, it seemed, that could possibly happen to me. My fear began to mix with a growing sense of huffiness. I'd just about had it with all this emotional bullying stuff so, on impulse, I decided to call her bluff and really play the part of 'Big Boy'.

I stood up slowly, in a John Wayne kind of mood, and looked at her levelly in the face. 'I'm leaving now. I've had enough of this. I don't want to waste your time or my time. Just let me get past and I'll be out of here.'

Her breasts were as formidable a barrier as any sentries. They appeared to block off any possible escape route. To extend my method-acting into a real cowboy move, I'd have

to push my way past the haughty obstacle they presented. John Wayne would have had a smoking gun in a situation like this, and I began to wish I'd followed Docherty's advice that I should carry at least a can of mace to ward off crazies on the game. But is it ethical to mace a 42" bosom? At that moment, weaponless as usual, it was a merely hypothetical question.

'I can see that *we're* going to have to teach you a real lesson, big boy,' Charm observed thoughtfully.

I didn't like the sudden introduction of this '*we*'.

Charm knew I had been rattled further for she pushed up the intensity of her attack a few more notches. 'My man is waiting in the next room. He is a very, very big black man. He likes to work on guys like you. You know what I think?' She paused dramatically here, with all the timing of a scheming Lady Macbeth about to bloody her and her husband's hands. 'I think I should tie you down onto that wooden horse over there and call him in here. And then I think he should stick his giant cock right up you, virgin boy, so that you scream with the pain. You'd like that, wouldn't you?'

She was winning our tryst of psychological warfare hands down. I was at a complete loss now. No one ever said something like that to John Wayne and, anyway, it was completely feasible that she had a pimp next door. And if he was as crazy as her . . .? I could imagine my poor mother reading the tragic headlines six thousand miles away: 'White South African draft-dodger raped to death by deranged black man with 15" penis in London sex and drugs and calypso flat . . .'

Suddenly Charm was laughing, laughing that hysterical roar of a gale which was a sound as heartening as the rattle of keys at dawn is for the condemned man. But her laugh did not break off this time – it kept rolling out of her in great waves. Finally she managed to speak again.

'It's OK, big boy, I was only joking with you. No need to look serious, mon! It just a little game we were playing – see?'

She cupped her cleavage between her two hands as some strange kind of peace offering. She patted me kindly on the head and asked if I'd like a joint with her. Ordinarily, being at one with Jah and the weed, I would have smiled at the opportunity but I declined this time. Before I knew it the bubbly Charm would have had me hitting a huge bottleneck of crack.

After putting on her best baby voice and pleading with me to stay – to stop her feeling so bad that she'd terrified every last wit out of my still quivering body – I agreed that we'd do the interview on the condition that she dressed herself. Her ample-framed nudity was, in the circumstances, mildly disconcerting.

Charm brushed aside my request and said I should 'lighten up a little'. After all, this was her place and she wasn't ordering me to take off my clothes any longer. So, Charm, her skin covered in a sheen of sweat after the exertions of our 'little game', and I, clutching my tiny tape recorder, began our interview.

She wanted to use this as 'practice' because *The Sun* and *The Sport* were both due to visit her later that week. Apparently, unknown to me, Charm had developed a formidable tabloid reputation as the 'Top Black Bondage Bitch' to the legal profession. Her clientele was drawn, not from the bogus literary set as she had originally claimed, but from solicitors, barristers and, in particular, judges. She was especially severe on judges, 'For they come here and like to think they're the highest fuckers in the land – but they're worms. I prove this to them. You want to know how, Big Don?'

I nodded nervously, trying to please her. As soon as I did this I knew that I had made a terrible mistake. Charm's hand, like that imagined snake from before, shot out and grabbed hold of my balls. She held them firmly and looked at me again – the filmy madness now shifting up a gear into Cinemascope as she decided whether to squeeze or not. Paralysed by fear, I just sat there. 'You see, Big Don, I make

them give themselves up to my power. I have them in the palm of my hand and I squeeze them till their pips drop and their eyes pop out. Then I beat them with my belt and I walk all over them and I shit on them and I piss on them and I shove dildos up their tight white butts and I . . .'

'Look, Charm,' my voice quavered after I had leapt across the room to save my most potentially creative force from her bulldoze-like grip, 'you're a very interesting woman but I don't think this is working. I'm kinda intimidated by you and I'm sure it's all my fault but I think I really had better leave.'

As I watched her deciding on my fate I realized that, if nothing else, Charm had bent society's sexual rules to the extent that I at last had an inkling of what it felt like to be harassed and physically threatened by the opposite sex. Then, strangely, deciding that I should be allowed to leave her flat, Charm emerged briefly from her dark fantasy world.

Amid all her advice that I should chill out and learn to submit a little she said quietly, 'I'm sorry it didn't work out for you, mon. But, you know, I really hate men. They've done terrible things to me. So when these creeps come here I get a kick out of intimidating them. I like to see them crawl. I shouldn't have done that to you but, you know, you go crazy when you stay in this business too long.'

I hesitated at the front door, wanting to ask her more, wanting to say that I was the one who was sorry that things hadn't worked out for her. But just as my mouth moved, she flung hers open even wider and started that coruscating laugh again. She squeezed my balls hard this time and pushed me back against the door. Her laugh stopped as suddenly as it had erupted. 'Good luck, mon, there's no hard feelings between you and me but you must go now. I have another man coming soon – and he will really deserve my punishment.'

Having survived this testicle-threat I mumbled an absurd 'Good luck, Charm' farewell and stumbled painfully from

her flat – relieved to be out of that world again and back in the fresh air where the so-called 'ordinary people' live, mostly oblivious to the tumult inside the hearts and heads of women like Charm.

That whole episode might have quickly assumed a dream-like quality if it had not been for the fact that, less than a week later, *The Sun* devoted a half-page to Charm. My memory hadn't been rollicking off-beam. She was as tough as I had remembered. *The Sun*'s ace-reporter appeared to have been subjected to a similarly scathing performance. Inexplicably, I felt myself warm to her. At least she was consistent, my dear Charm; at least she hadn't succumbed yet to the inertia which, I had since discovered, pervaded the more typical zones of telephone card prostitution.

Inevitably, prostitution is built upon a deadening depersonalization of human contact. But, up until then, I had been lucky. With the notable exception of Vince, every prostitute I had met had cast aside her, or his, rudimentary 'time is money' framework and had given up hours, and their precious signifiers of hundreds of pounds, to step on my ceaseless grind of questions. But such politeness did not extend readily to the more cloistered world of the 'telephone booth girls'.

In response to the booth adverts, I visited ten flats in and around Bayswater and Paddington. There was a depressing sameness to each encounter. As in Soho, a 'maid', almost invariably a middle-aged English woman who read *Hello* and *Chat* and watched television for twelve straight hours, answered the buzz from the door outside. If the flat wasn't in the basement or on the ground floor, a long walk up crammed flights of stairs was typically required – as lofts were equally favoured for that kind of prostitution. Only an unusual visit did not entail an awkward brushing past of at least one man walking the opposite way.

After a while I gave up being bothered by the possibility that I would be regarded as some kind of corrupt deviant

for visiting such debauched houses, for I saw that the other men were shadowed by that same fear, so much so that eye-contact was a definite 'no-no' in this unspoken ritual of client-to-client etiquette. Only once did someone say something to me as I climbed my way to the top of a converted Victorian terrace in London Road, just round the corner from the Paddington underground – 'Bad head, floppy breasts, don't bother,' murmured an elderly man in a tweed jacket as he rushed past me. Being slow on the uptake it took me a while to work out that he was referring to the prostitute's oral technique rather than the limping hedgehog haircut I was inadvertently sporting at the time.

When business was brisk, and a passing conveyor-belt of men in operation, the prostitute became almost robotic in her responses. Regular conversation was, at best, a remote possibility, obliterated by that stock opening refrain of 'Hi love, it's £20 for sex with a rubber, £25 for French and sex, £60 for half an hour, £100 for an hour – and then there's specialist services on offer if you've got something else in mind.' Again as in Soho's bedrooms, the schoolgirls' uniforms drooping on wire-hangers and the canes hooked onto dressing-tables said the rest. Even if the prostitute could be diverted momentarily from her single-minded business track by a naive request for 'an interview', the money riddle re-emerged soon enough. If she didn't hand over a minimum of £20 to the maid within a few minutes of discussion, a knock sounded on the door. 'Are you finished deciding yet, love?' was the standard maid response to any delay in the parting of cash. If a client was not prepared to cough up readily, then he was shown his way sharply to the door. It appeared to be a routine cast in stone.

But even when words of abuse occasionally followed me down the stairs, generally along 'fucking time-waster' lines, it was not difficult to feel a weary compassion for those prostitutes; for this is truly slab city, places reeking with lifeless bodies and dead souls, with women trapped in tiny rooms and their every quarter-hour, on a slow day, being

marked by the arrival of one more man, one more penis to wank or blow or fuck. I almost felt heartened that they could still show irritation towards me for that, at least, implied a sense of life otherwise missing from the relentless tedium of their days.

Those encounters also tempered the complacency of my conceit; for I had almost come to expect that I would be given the time and full attention of *every* prostitute I turned my eye to – to the extent that I often made the cardinal error of forgetting the depth of favour they were personally extending to me by talking so intimately about themselves. But the telephone booth girls were not so much working women as automated machines, programmed to churn out that '£20 for sex with a rubber, £25 for French and sex . . .' incantation with disheartening repetition.

Alice Teague had said that ' "The Enema Lady" is the sweetest old maid in town. She also knows more about the telephone booth girls than anyone else in London . . .' With that recommendation from Alice, who had already proved herself to be right on many occasions, there seemed no other course left for me to take. I would have to brave the rubber gloves and bowl of warm water which, I imagined, made up a typical 'Enema Lady' day.

Surprisingly, I liked 'Enema Lady'; perhaps most of all because I had approached her with a sense of dread bordering on terror after Charm and the S&M wastelands I had just crossed. An enema, to be brutally frank, was the last thing I needed. But I felt at ease with Emma Lang from the moment we met in her small flat in Paddington. She described herself as being 'a compact forty-eight-year-old ex-nurse' and there was certainly an air of imperious efficiency about her every action. But, still, she never appeared domineering; rather, she exuded an aura of placid patience.

Emma confirmed that, before branching out into her own authoritative field, she had 'worked all over West London

as a maid, from 1983 to 1988'. She reflected that 'those poor chicks become like nothing but battery hens. They're just cooped up in this cage of a room, having to lay egghead after egghead, if you'll excuse my punning, dear.

'I must have been the maid to a hundred-odd girls over the years. All of them being what I call the "telephone booth girls". It means that anyone can come off the street. Now that's fine if you operate like I do now – offering a highly individual and selective dispensation – but when you're young and thoughtless it just takes over your life. Those girls are ruined. They're robots, for they have to live their lives in an inhuman environment. It's quite terrible and I couldn't take it after five long years. Those girls having to work like machines and then most of the money they make being taken off them by those dreadful pimping landlords.

'Some of the girls used to say they'd be better off on the streets because sometimes even danger is preferable to boredom. At least on the street they would have to move and to stay alert. If you work as a telephone girl, however, you just become dead wood. I must say I'm hugely relieved to be out of that dreadful business.'

Many would think that the – excuse the accuracy of this cliché – matronly ex-nurse and maid had not so much departed this 'dreadful business' as entered its blackest hole now that she operated as 'Enema Lady'. 'It's quite wrong to think that my dear. I come and go as I please. I work from home and when I don't want to hear from anyone I remove the telephone from its cradle and I relax. I am not a prisoner to the phone – unlike the poor young things who are enslaved by their pimps' booth adverts.

'You see after I had worked as a maid for so long I felt there was little alternate form of employment for me. Only nursing, for I had worked as a private nurse for fifteen years. But I couldn't go back to the rigours of nursing, of working night shifts at my age. So I decided to combine the two, nursing and running an advert – and so, dear, here I am, "Enema Lady" herself!'

It was difficult to think of Emma as a 'prostitute', even though she advertized her telephone number alongside some of the hardest cases in the booth business. Her work as 'Enema Lady' was exceedingly strange – and yet when she spoke about it, it was hard to make the usual kind of British toilet jokes about fun with 'one's botty on the potty'.

'There is nothing sordid about the service I offer. It's not a sex service – except perhaps in the sense that I allow my boys to go back in time to when they remember being "pre-sex conscious". Except of course that then there was a subliminal level of sexuality operating. You know, being a boy yourself, that there was once a time when you were helpless, when you were smothered by your mother's love. When she did everything for you. Dressed you, fed you, burped you, washed you, wiped you. It was a dream-like time wasn't it?'

'I honestly can't remember much about that time,' I answered.

'But of course you could remember it, if you really wanted to, dear,' she insisted gently, 'if you only allowed yourself to open up. But I can see you're too tied up in concepts of responsibility to go the way of any of my baby-boys. I am too, mind – so it is to me that they come.

'I specialize in enemas and also in dressing men in nappies, and changing them when they are dirtied, and also in placing them in my special baby enclosure where I give them time to remember their earliest days. None of this seems unnatural to me – in our dotage and senility we revert to childhood and the men who visit me are merely taking steps back while they are lucid enough to appreciate the experience. I am not interested much in the psychology of the work I do, although I am sure that there is much to say on the subject. I am more practical. This is a basic need amongst many men, and like the good ex-nurse that I am, I take care of that need. It is a job to me – and it is also sometimes necessary for one to be administered an enema.

There's nothing mystical or perverted about that – it must be done on occasions and I am there to do it.'

I had always felt loath to probe any link between toilet-training and sexual-awareness. It never appeared to be too serious a gap to have in life and so I was happy when, after guiding me around her 'nursery' and through her photograph album of stubble-faced babies dressed in blue plastic nappies and sitting in the middle of a sheep-like enclosure, Emma spoke instead about her love for geraniums and George Eliot.

As we drank peppermint tea on her floral sofa, ruminating on the unbearably sad ending to *Mill On The Floss*, it felt right to accept the 'Enema Lady'. More than any of the other prostitutes I had met, she seemed happy and she gave much comfort to her 'baby boys', even if they eventually had to retreat from her warm flat back into real life as middle-aged or even elderly men. There seemed no point in prying into either the recesses of their needs or the reasons for her exotic practicality with bodily functions. And so I spent an hour listening to her talk about other things – she knew more about geraniums, George Eliot and making sublime cheese-cake than anyone I had ever met. She had arrived a long time ago at that place Colin Dugmore once imagined. 'Enema Lady', truly, had found serenity.

Chapter Thirteen

On the Corner, Under the Tree

After hearing 'Enema Lady's' refined appraisal of babyism's most secret world, it was a strange sensation to return that evening to the real world's 'shock and dismay', not to mention fluttering titillation, at the news that Sir Allan Green, the Director of Public Prosecutions, had been arrested for kerb-crawling through King's Cross the night before. On national news bulletins, a variety of psychologists were wheeled out to explain the supposed reasons behind the 'surprising and disturbing actions' of 'such a successful and respected' member of the British Establishment. Watching all this, I suddenly realized that we were *meant* to be amazed that a man 'of the DPP's *stature*' should actually consider picking up a prostitute. It was as if we were not meant to notice instead the hypocrisy, as if the DPP's crawling along Goodsway was an individual aberration rather than yet another example of the way in which prostitution permeates every class and corner of British society.

The next few mornings were little better, considering the national newspapers' coverage of the scandal - 1991's second, following in the wake of Sara Dale's and Norman Lamont's Kensington tête-à-tête. While the tabloids ran routine comparisons between the different women in Sir Allan's life – 'the loyal wife' and the 'cheap whore' – the 'qualities' were hardly any more imaginative. The pathway to Lindi St. Clair's boudoir in Earl's Court was worn away

some more by journalists from *The Guardian*, *The Independent*, *The Times* and *The Daily Telegraph* sent to write snappy 'colour pieces' on the media's 'token tart'. As amusing as some of these articles were, their salivating disposability only contributed to the impression that the British media, while relentless in its pursuit of prostitution as a supplier of 'sensational news stories', is often hapless when it comes to dealing with the same subject as a problematic 'social issue'. Scintillating double entendres and the reliable one-liner about raincoat-wearing punters were once again the preferred route for most journalists to follow this time round the sex-scandal. The chronic violence faced by prostitutes in King's Cross, Stamford Hill, Paddington and Streatham was supposedly less interesting and, presumably, not especially suitable for these ubiquitous 'colour pieces'.

A few days after the scandal broke I saw Lee Docherty, struggling free from his Mandy Kavanagh-induced heartache. He confirmed that Kimberly Evans, 'the DPP's prostitute', was one of the women whose photographs lined his King's Cross wall. He hardly knew her, he said, for she was relatively new to the area. But Docherty was much more concerned with warning me about possible reprisals from some of the more distinguished clients I had interviewed on tape. He meant, primarily, Alistair.

The irreparable wreckage inflicted on Sir Allan Green's career was just the kind of warning light, he feared, which could lead some of my more desperate interviewees to drastic action. I knew that Alistair had come to regret bitterly ever talking to me on tape after our drunken cruise through Soho. Through Mandy, he began making increasingly bitter, thinly-veiled threats against me. His worst fear was that I would reveal his identity, and sell the tapes of our evening together, to one of the tabloids to earn myself a nifty fifty grand. He knew that, for the *News Of The World* or *The Sun*, it would make an irresistibly 'juicy story'.

Consequently, when my flat was broken into and nothing

apart from my hundreds of cassettes were stolen (and recriminatory messages smeared on the walls), I had a solid idea who was behind the robbery. But what Alistair didn't know then was that I had back-up copies of the tapes elsewhere.

In a moment of crass bravado when I bumped into him at the National Theatre on the South Bank, of all places, I told him about these duplicate cassettes. We were both standing in the queue at the Lyttelton bar, crushed up against the counter by the impatient cultural hoards. In one of those creepy quirks that thankfully hardly ever happen, I turned slightly to my right and looked straight into the rapidly tightening face of Alistair who had noticed me just a moment before. I stared at him in disbelief.

'Hello,' I said eventually.

He nodded curtly. I couldn't help images of Mandy and Jackie reeling through my head when he shifted haughtily a few feet further away from me. As he barked out his order – 'Double scotch and a glass of dry white wine' – I found myself inexplicably inching towards him as if propelled by some strange magnetic force, called 'fucking stupidity' in Docherty's words.

'My flat was broken into last month, Alistair. Did Mandy tell you?'

He flexed his creaking jaw, as if this was a sign that he had considerably more muscle behind him than I could ever dream of. It looked like he was chewing a huge cud of grass. 'I don't know what you're talking about,' he muttered acidly.

'They took all my tapes,' I said brightly.

'Really?' He ground his teeth, as if in exasperation that the one idiot to have stumbled from beneath Waterloo Bridge and into the theatre's distinguished foyer should have latched on to him – a respectable, law-abiding citizen just hoping for a quiet night of cultured, incident-free drama.

'Not to worry though,' I grinned, enjoying my school-boyish revenge as I paused, dramatically of course, before

delivering the killer line. 'I had copies of every one stashed away in a safe place.'

The intended devastating effect was diluted by the simultaneous arrival of Alistair's drinks but I thought his hand looked unusually shaky as he paid the barman. With a cutting 'Excuse me' he whirled away and I watched him walking briskly towards an elegantly greying woman, whom I took to be his wife, ensconced in the programme notes. I wondered then what they had said to each other the morning after the DPP resigned, when they were breakfasting over their newspapers – *The Times* for him and, presumably, *The Daily Mail* for her.

Hearing all this, Docherty, in his singular way, ranted at me. 'These aren't jokers you're dealing with, you know! This DPP thing will scare the shit out of Alistair – so you'd better watch out!' But, for all his lively admonishment, Docherty knew that my mouth was helplessly sealed against revealing Alistair's identity – to do so, apart from going back on our admittedly tenuous 'gentleman's agreement', would open up every other person I had interviewed to their fear of similarly shattering exposure. Most people appeared to believe me when I said their named identity was of no concern to the writing of this book. Alistair, however, was not one of them – and he was right in realizing that there was something irredeemably personal between the two of us.

There was something frighteningly personal, too, about the way two skinheads spoke to me a few nights after I had seen Docherty, a week after the DPP scandal. It was a cold November night, just before midnight. I had taken a few steps down towards my basement flat before I noticed that the outside light was, strangely, switched on. It was then that I saw the two of them. At first I thought of Vince. But these were, fortunately, less muscular skins.

Reverting to my stock word when shocked, I said a startled 'Hello?'

'Hello, matey,' the taller one said.

Slowly sinking into the seriousness of the situation, but

still trying desperately to find a logical explanation, I asked, 'What are you doing here?'

'We're waiting for you, matey,' the same skinhead murmured.

'I think this is a mistake – you must want someone else,' I found myself wheedling.

'No mistake – we're waiting for you, Mr Tape-Man, Mr Writer.'

The days when I once would have been pleased to have been described as a writer seemed a far way off then. I felt terribly cold as I looked down at them. They came walking towards me.

'It's nothing personal, matey! You've just gotta stop writing this book.'

I was still marvelling at the slick irony at work in these boys when the first punch landed, skewing my nose painfully towards my left cheek. By the time the second crashed home I had given up wanting to pump them by their hands for the sharp allusion to this book's title which, simultaneously, allowed them to abdicate personal responsibility for the measured, concentrated beating they were about to administer. That second punch knocked me against the iron railings and I was then a hopelessly open flailing target for their boots. It was a Colin Dugmore-like situation – with all those mythical bobbing and weaving techniques I used to be so adept at doing in my mirror as a fourteen-year-old laid to waste by the thudding precision of their first few blows. It went on for maybe another ten seconds, seconds which felt as slow as minutes, and they were talking all that time, these boys – telling me to wrap it up, this writing lark, before some serious damage was done to me. By the time the first of the neighbour's lights came thankfully shining down on us they had, in what is the definitive tribute in sporting parlance, 'done the business'. But, in a creepily intimate passing moment, the more talkative skinhead knelt down, and almost whispered, 'Remember matey, nothing personal, but if we have to get sent back here, we'll be

bringing fucking crowbars. We'll fucking split your head open - like a melon, matey.'

Then they were off, running away into the coldness.

It didn't end there either, just with that broken nose, split lip and those few cracked ribs. For, a week later, a week in which I had done nothing but mope painfully around, hardly talking to anyone, they came again. This time when they knew I would already be in. It was quarter to four in the morning and, with a hurting groan, as I turned on my side, I woke to the sound of a violent beating on the door. 'Melonhead, fucking open up! Melonhead, let us in! It's us, melonhead!' they sang with all the sinister fakery of terrified children chanting in *Hallowe'en Comes To Notting Hill, Tuesday Morning, 3.45 a.m. (Part II)*. And before the sheer brilliance and wit of their intimidation had sunk in, they were gone – leaving me to wonder when they would be back, with their melon-splitting tools.

But weeks went by and I began to believe it was over. I started to feel less interested in the impressively black and yellow bruise down my right flank, for it was already fading, than in what was happening to the young, unforgettable street prostitute I had met not long before the DPP scandal broke. And, in thinking about her life, and the lives of those many other prostitutes I knew who were so used to violence that it was hardly a shock when it happened again to each of them, each new time, I felt an anger that was both acrid and sustaining. It was that anger I bit down on when I started to write again. While my newly acquired 'melon-head' status had them reeling in disbelief in the bondage basements and on the street corners of my prostitution places, my own coy smiles and shrugs hid the emptiness I felt. The little that had happened to me was nothing when set against the unending legacy of violence that has always shrouded, especially, those prostitutes who walk the streets at night – vulnerable to the fearful psychoses of men and the contempt of the law, practised by the legal establishment and led by the Director of Public Prosecutions.

Amidst this outrage, the 'melonhead' chant kept on popping up in my head. Its sham-playfulness, ironically thick with violence and hatred, reminded me of the much more disturbing chant which rolled down the terraces of Elland Road in the late 1970s at the height of the Yorkshire Ripper's unchecked trail of murder. Somehow the prostitutes, the women who had suffered that awful fate, and the women who were still living in the Ripper's fearful shadow, were forgotten in that wintry afternoon chanting. But then, to the singers, a small section of the Leeds United masses, they weren't women after all – they were whores and they could be counted in a song: 'Ripper 13, Police 0, Ripper 13, Police 0 . . .'

Leila, at nineteen, stood on her corner in the drizzle beneath the gently dripping black branches of an old tree. Someone, the one she called 'The Still Man' probably, had once told her the name of this tree but she was fucked now if she could remember it. It was her tree anyway, her place, her beat, and so she kept it simple and just called it 'tree'. Sometimes she rapped softly to it as if it were less a rain-glistened willow than an ecstatically swaying audience of thousands hanging on each word, her every rhyme.

There was no point in wasting time so she worked on her raps whenever she could, standing here beneath her tree, waiting for the next car. If she stopped to think too much about what she was doing she felt sure she would go out of her mind. Leila might have grown tired of working the street but she wasn't about to crumble and go on the needle like some of the saddest girls. It was all down to bad luck, being fucked over by fate, she thought. But if street-life was bad she was *baader* than bad. She already had lines from her first ever rap worked out in her head: 'I might have nowhere to run, hon, but I'm real tricky, dicky, an' I'm ready to rock the mic like I'm no kinda dyke, 'cos I rap blacker than black, jack, maybe a honey with no money but with a life on the up, set for some sorta cup . . .'

In Leila's bleaker moments, like then, when she was not sure whether she was happy or sad that business was so thin on the ground, she wondered if she'd got what it took to really rhyme a rap so that she stood out from the rest. For turning herself into a rapper was the only way she imagined she could pull herself up from beneath her tree. Yet a rap that had sounded hot in her head a few hours earlier when she stepped out on the street, with an imaginary beat-box throbbing inside her, now seemed thin and white, especially when she had to face some of those crawlers giving her the finger or the tongue through their car windows. Who the fuck would honestly want to chill out to a rap where the best she could do was to rhyme 'up' with 'cup' and 'done' with 'fun'? She had to get down and come up with raps which were leaner and meaner . . . or just something that didn't sound like it had been thought up by a desperate street whore at two a.m. on a sodden Thursday morning.

Sometimes she nearly despaired but that was when she would snap on her Walkman and mouth along to Roxanne Shante, Queen Latifah and Public Enemy's Sister Souljah – *Welcome To The Terrordome!* you fucking gnome, she'd glower as the bastard 'Tyson', the fucking pimp, drove past, giving her the death-stare, that make-some-money glare.

At times like that she'd be lucky to pull in more than a few quick twenties, even though she was, by a long way, the freshest girl round these streets. But she was choosy, too, at least compared with the others, and she turned down the obvious creeps whereas the rest of the pack would blow and fuck any open fly as long as there were a few notes in it to feed them their next hit.

She had already sussed that if you wanted to get off the street you had to stay clean, because then you could use your cash to slowly build the dream of moving away forever. But once you were looking merely to survive on the street, to keep on going, to keep on keeping on doing this, then the smack started to sing with the voice of a siren. Junk got girls out of the grime for a few short hours and Leila looked

close enough to almost envy the bliss of their escape. But, long before that, she had seen those who were desperate for a fix. It scared her off for life. She never could really drum out of her head the wailing of Myra, 'Tyson's' first girl, her arms and legs covered in reddened tracks and blotchy sores, as she begged him for a shot of smack to blunt her terrible pain.

It was then that she fell out of her short-term love for 'Tyson' because, after he had pushed Myra down the front steps to their block, he had crooned sweet nothings in Leila's ear telling her that she was his special girl and that he'd give Myra's white stuff to her instead. It would make her fly, it would get her so high she'd be rapping with the angels. They'd have a hit, now, snug-up on the bed together, jus' 'cos she was his special baby. He was always calling her 'baby' and, for the first time, it sickened her. It was 'baby' this, 'baby' that, 'sure thing baby', 'maybe baby'. Always fucking baby. The word tore a hole in her now.

Remembering that time, as his rear-view lights tailgated away into the night, she could still taste the anger that lined her mouth like puke. He must've thought she was fucking baby-stupid to want to follow Myra down that smack-strewn road. But maybe he was the one who was really baby-stupid for what sort of guy would try to coax a girl into jacking up just a few minutes after she had seen a junkie nightmare staggering on the last of her yellowed chicken-legs.

She'd never liked Myra, not from the moment she'd set eyes on the sniffing, whining girl. Myra was trouble, so much so that this was the name Leila silently gave her – it made the same kind of simple, down to the core sense as calling this thing she was shivering beneath 'tree'. But still, even a girl with trouble tattooed into her deserved something better than the treatment dished out by 'Tyson'.

They had fought bitterly that night, she and 'Tyson', she screaming and beating at him with uncontrolled fury. But when he started to hit her with heavy, deliberate punches, telling her at the same time that *this* was where his name

came from, from 'Mighty Mike' Tyson, she knew that she had to channel her rage in other ways.

As he battered her, a crazy thought wheeled through her head. Leila felt like she was some kind of exotic caged bird screeching wildly, never singing, as she crashed from one set of bars to another. It was not a beautiful sight, baby, she said. But even as the blows rained down on her she felt all right because it was then that she cut her heart free from 'Tyson'. It was then that she began to dream her dream which was as wild and colourful as any jungle bird swinging away in great big arcs across a bright blue sky. She was going to leave this bastard behind, she was going to be someone, she was going to wear the sharpest trainers in town and, all the time, she was going to be rapping. Leila was going to be a rap queen, some time soon. She'd be trashing her yellow dress and high heels before the year was through.

Since then things had changed, a lot, between her and 'Tyson'. He still called her 'baby' but now he threaded the word through with threat. It hung over her, like that tree, but with the promise of mayhem rather than refuge. The rain was running down her face and even though she thought of 'Tyson' she felt steady for she knew that this life on the streets would not last forever. She would get out soon, she repeated, she knew she would. It hardly mattered that she had already tried twice to escape and both times he had tracked her down and brought her back.

People who were not from the street would never understand the simple truth of his violent hold on her. They would say things to her like, 'Tell him to fuck off' or 'Get someone to kill him' or 'Go to the police'. She already did the first, so often and so effectively that even though he would sometimes manage to graze her with a swing he had given up trying to turn her onto smack. As for the second and third ideas, she couldn't really see the point in swapping one 'Tyson' for another and then, ultimately, what was she, after all, but a black slut to the police. She already had three convictions for soliciting, after just seven months on the

street. This was nothing when set against the fifty-odd fines and nights in jail of someone like the terminally troubled Myra but still enough to mark her down in police eyes as being something less than a woman. She was 'tart', she was 'whore', she was 'slag'. She was black too.

But this blackness lifted her, so much so that she bridled when people asked if she really was black. Her hair was long and her skin, in the Still Man's words, the colour of dark honey. But she *is* black, even though her father called himself white. It was kind of strange, she said later, that she had spoken about her blackness in more detail than ever to a white guy, to me, to a fucking *white South African* of all people.

Yet we shared some moments together, just talking, and she found herself spilling out things that she hardly ever said aloud. Then she would get angry because these were her dreams and she didn't want to share them with just anyone, not until they had flowered and climbed above the dirt she felt every time 'Tyson' stuck out his hand for his nightly £30 or £40; or whenever she had to go down on some bearded businessman who breathed a garlicky 'suck it bitch' so that those sour words rode the light hairs on the back of her slim neck.

But talk she did, about both her past and the future and of course the seemingly endless here and now. And, yes, she really did get 'The Still Man' to talk to me, an encounter which, then, she had yet to see the fruits of. But she saw him then, gliding gently round the corner. It was a rained-out, totally Stillman sort of night, the kind of time he always came out, looking for her, for her alone now.

Leila had been a little frightened of Stillman the first few times he had picked her up. He was difficult to make out, being so unlike most of the other fuckers who drove by. She had even wondered, in one blinding moment of terror, if he was a killer, a serial killer even, deep in the London summer of that particular craze. Before she knew who he was, his car had appeared out of nowhere. She had stared

into the hazy window, giving the then faceless Stillman the required look of faked lust, and she had not been surprised when he cruised to a slow stop just a few yards away from her wall. They almost all stopped for her; but if she didn't like the look of the guy she would linger a while at his window before shaking her head, 'No'. That made some of them mad but she didn't care.

Stillman looked like he had been cruising for eternity, but he chose just the right moment to stop that first time. It was one of those rainy, police-free nights and, unlike the other drivers, he knew it. He was calm, he was still, when she told him her price, which was just a little steeper than that charged by the others. He looked so at ease, even though she later found out that he was really churning up inside, that it was then that she suddenly feared his stillness and wondered if this was a killer's silent way.

But when he spoke, softly and hesitantly, she knew. He was all right, this one, this 'Still Man'. She stepped into his car and Stillman drove, they were together then for the first of many times.

Stillman trawled the streets like a secret virtuoso. He knew the street as well as, if not better than, most of the women standing on their caged corners. And they knew he was different from the rest, from the other kerb-crawlers. He was not just another chancer jerking past each corner, uncertain of exactly what or who he was looking for in the elusive faces of the waiting prostitutes.

At the back-end of a night Stillman drove with a sure smoothness. His grey estate-van glided at just the right pace; slow enough to make his intention clear but also sufficiently fast for him to slip into a higher gear should he choose to drift by without giving undue offence or, more seriously, to evade the sharking attentions of a passing police car.

But if his driving was unobtrusive to all but the professionally watchful street girls then the way he walked was eerily distinctive. A blind man would have noticed that

as soon as any other; for he could not have failed to hear the clicking gait that set Stillman apart. A spindly man who always wore a peaked cap and heeled shoes, Stillman walked with a kind of shuffling limp. As he moved, he seemed to rise and fall like a brittle ship being buffeted by high rollers. Thick black hair streamed behind him from beneath his cap, as if it were smoke stoking its way out of his funnelled neck.

That's why he loved driving; for then he was not the bobbing lurch of limbs he became when walking. In his grey ghost of a carriage he was the real Stillman, or 'The Still Man', as his favourite girl murmured to herself whenever she saw him snake round a corner with the merest dipping of his lights saying his kind of 'Hello'. He sat erect and rapt behind the wheel, showing barely a trace of movement. He slipped by the first time, enjoying the drive, letting her know with the barest of nods that he'd be back for her once he'd circled the block.

Stillman came out regularly, if not on any specific nightly or weekly basis, to sail round Stamford Hill, Paddington, Queensway and Notting Hill. He liked to drive when the streets were at their emptiest, especially when there was a light rain falling. He'd look up at the sky then and, even when it was two in the morning, see that its blackness was washed over with the flat yellow of London's reflected light. He sometimes wished that the night sky could be blanketed in star-checked darkness, as he had been told it usually was in fantastically difficult places to imagine like the deserts and velds of Africa.

Yet in his car Stillman dreamed different dreams. When he drove the roads drifted beneath him like dark, greasy, whispering rivers. He rolled the window halfway down so that he could hear the steamy hiss of rubber on wet tar – a sound with a steady rhythm of its own, broken only by the deeper splash of water whenever he hit a puddle. All around him, on every window, droplets of rain shone beneath those sallow street lights.

To Stillman, his car was like a ceaselessly panning camera

and the surrounding night-time girls came from a street-set different to that used on a hundred remembered TV films. For this was England not America, London rather than New York or Miami; and so this always became Stillman's own personalized movie with him framing the shots and calling the cuts. He alone decided when to drive and where to make a turn or a stop for one particular girl, someone whom he saw was special just by looking at the way she stood in a shaft of shadowy light. It was this feeling of enclosed authority, of intimate choice, which pleased him as much as the touch of cool, damp air on his skin and the sound of the tyres almost singing along the rainy road.

Only a few minutes before he had been asked, by me, to explain the reasons for his driving. Why do you go out so late at night? Why do you like driving in the rain so much? What is it about the streets that makes them so addictive at night? What makes those girls up ahead, like Leila, his honeyed Leila, so special? These were the kind of unanswerable questions I kept asking, each one separated from the others by long silences and a few barren words which seemed to hold only the sparsest light and meaning. But what could Stillman say when those times belonged to him alone, when he was not used to drawing on words to explain the comfort he found in driving his way, at that time, along those streets?

Stillman had agreed to speak to me because Leila had asked him to, because she said that this was the *only* thing she had ever asked, or would ask, from him. Our meeting in a grim Tottenham pub seemed interminably stilted. Stillman squirmed over his tomato juice as if this was what it meant to be pinned to a board and held up for the close scrutiny of prying eyes – even though I spoke much more than him, mostly about Mandy and Jackie, about 'Charm' and 'Enema Lady', drawling through my catalogue of stories so that he hopefully felt the focus drifting away from him. But then, just as he started to relax, I asked if I could drive with him. He was caught unawares, not intentionally by me,

but I pressed him further. I said that I wanted to see his streets in the early morning, when the rest of London was asleep and it seemed as if the hookers and crawlers had the whole city to themselves for a few short hours.

Stillman eventually agreed, reluctantly, to go along with that peculiar request – with me submitting more easily to his traded suggestion that I leave my tape recorder switched off in the car, so as not to spoil his concentration. We drove long after midnight for an hour or so, through Stamford Hill and then across town to Bayswater and Notting Hill. It was a perfect Stillman night, with the rain spitting softly all through our drive. Although Stillman felt awkward, like his own private space was under attack, he tried to answer as many questions as he could before his polite patience wore out. Then he began to shift uneasily in his seat as if he was walking again rather than driving.

There was not, after all, much that could be said about his street-coasting. We ended up talking about other things. And that was when Stillman said he missed the ideal of a really black sky, after he had heard my talk about some African nights. For a moment, Stillman wondered what it might be like to travel to a place such as Africa. But his desire did not grow for he knew that he already moved in the way he most wanted – in his own car, in this same city, along these well-worn roads. This was where he was most at home and most alive. He could see no reason for going elsewhere. Stillman had been cruising for seven straight years and the thirty before these appeared as empty and alien to him as any African desert would be to a passing English tourist. Anyway, he travelled a lot, even if it was just along these selected streets.

He was ready to return to their private, rain-licked embrace as the clock in his car hit two-fifteen. By then he had had more than enough of me and so he drew up alongside an empty kerb, after we had passed maybe a dozen prostitutes in our time together. Despite his discomfort, Stillman stayed courteous until the very end, not wishing

to draw too much attention to himself by appearing excessively strange.

Stillman's secret night life, away from his day-time job as a blue-uniformed, peaked-cap caretaker in a faceless five storey office block in Pimlico, unfolded naturally before him, devoid of the kinks others might expect to find. Whether or not I could understand this remained a mystery to Stillman; but then he himself was not an easy book to read. That was the way Stillman had always chosen to be so that people would move on from him, their interest untouched by the life he led.

We sat in his idling car for a while. Stillman looked then as if he might be wondering if I would say what I thought of his life. But I was quiet too and he began to breathe a little easier. He knew that some of the questions I had put to him had been as mild and bleary as his own hesitant answers. There had even been those few moments when we spoke about the yellowish sky and the roads looking like rivers.

Stillman probably did not know why, and I remained unsure, but suddenly he started to talk about Leila, specifically about the time he had first set eyes on her. It had been a night like this, dreamily soft with rain. He had been cruising for an hour, doing what he did so many nights – just driving and looking, not even thinking about picking up a girl. For there were those nights when the car itself brought adequate release and it was enough just to flow with the tide of rain. He had driven past at least ten girls in the area, starting from the edge of the Seven Sisters Road and then moving right into Stamford Hill.

There it was the 'twenty in the car, forty in the flat' red-light trade, with the type of clients who generally preferred to dip in for the first option. After midnight, even before Stillman ventured out, the streets opened up their familiar three-part ritual. The girls, the cars and, circling and watching, the police. It was a game with an age-old set of rules. The prostitutes and the police know them by heart

and it was they who guided the nervously impulsive men, those unlike Stillman himself, through this delicately illicit but relentlessly inevitable exchange of sex for cash.

Her head was down at first, looking away from the passing parade of Sierras and Saabs. A cluster of girls stood across the road from her, near the railway station street corner, wearing the ancient uniform of short skirts, dark-seamed stockings and brightly heeled shoes. It looked as if they were taking things easy. They seemed to be laughing casually beneath the station sign but, coming closer and seeing the cold slip from their glossed mouths in small spirals of steam, it became clearer to Stillman. This was work, even laughing was work. The way they lit their cigarettes smacked of work, as did the clever trick of inclining their heads slightly your way so that it looked like they had been waiting personally all night long for you, for Stillman.

He had seen them before, often enough. He had even stopped for some of them and taken the ride down to the deserted warehouses and parking lots on the far side of the Seven Sisters Road. But Stillman had never seen the like of the girl on the wall. She looked up at last. Tall, strong, young, he remembered thinking, the colour of honey, his very own special early morning taste.

She wore a black coat, open at the front, and underneath it a yellow dress pulled in tight by a black belt. She had her hair, surprisingly long and straight, pulled back loosely from her face which was sparsely made-up. She looked up with the barest trace of a questioning smile.

Stillman swept dazedly past her and when he had spun the car round the nearest block to get her back in his sights he saw her leaning down so that her face was level with another car window. It was a black Volvo. Stillman could never forget the inexplicable wash of despair that slurried through him. The door opened noiselessly and she was in, sliding into the front seat before Stillman could see her close-up again. The Volvo drew away steadily and Stillman kept

his distance, like a disenchanted but still diligent private investigator in an American movie, following them to the end of the road where they turned right towards Tottenham and then sharp left. The streets were dingier here and lined with factories and the familiar DIY warehouses, with their incongruous names like Texas.

They turned down a small side-alley adjoining one of the cement parking lots. Stillman accelerated past the turning and eventually curled back down towards the lighter roads, knowing that there was no way he could follow them there just to get another look at her, this girl whose name he had still to learn.

Leila.

He came back for her later that same night and, since then, again and again as her 'Still Man'; one reliable totem in the swirling storm of chaos which framed her dark nights out on those streets.

Soon after she left Stillman, Leila came knocking gently on my front room window. Knowing that it was near that pre-dawn 'melonhead' witching-hour, she was careful not to frighten me. I was still awake, just, and surprised that she should have appeared on my doorstep that early in the morning. But her pleasure in having helped me to meet Stillman was too beguiling for me to send her away without revealing how our encounter had unfolded. Stillman, of course, had said only a paltry few sentences to her about the interview. All that she had gathered was that we had gone driving together in his sedan.

'You don't mind me coming by, hey Don,' she gushed as she shook some of the wetness from her hair, 'but I just wanted to hear how it went. Did it help you?'

Her desire to help me was affecting, even just before four in the morning, and as her shiny face looked hopefully into mine I felt for her and said, 'Yeah, it was pretty interesting, Leila. Thank you!'

'Shit, I'm so pleased! All he would say is that you'd driven

together. I couldn't believe *that*! It must have been pretty amazing!'

'Surreal' might have been a more accurate word but, laughing with her, I settled too on 'amazing' – for Stillman was a pretty amazing sort of guy, what with those shoes, his limp, that hair and then his cap to top it all.

'What limp?' Leila asked blankly, leaning against the hallway wall.

'Stillman's limp,' I said equally surprised. 'He really lurches around when he walks but behind the wheel he's just as you said – the amazing "Still Man!" '

'Fuck! I never knew that!'

'You mean you *never* noticed?'

'Christ, how could I? I've never ever seen him walk!'

The strangeness of that fact, what with Leila having given Stillman at least thirty-odd hand and blow-jobs in the six months since she had known him, struck both of us. Leila burst out laughing. 'Fuck me!' she eventually giggled. 'Imagine *that*! I've never seen the fucker walk! Wow! What sort of job is this, anyway?'

We started to drink then, in my bedroom, watching the level in the bottle of Scotch sink slowly down as Leila talked about this, as she decided, weird kind of work. But she began first with Stillman.

'He's really different, that guy! Shit, when I first started with him I just wasn't used to him. He was just real *straaaaange, baby*! He never even haggled about the price. You know the others, most of them, they always want to knock off five quid. I don't let them. That's my price – £30 for a fuck in the car, £50 in a room. They always complain that it's much more than the other girls. But, you know, I'm not like the other girls. So if they don't want to pay, then I say "OK, bye then!" They pay then – they always do in the end. But the Still Man, he just gave me the money. He didn't want to fuck. Just a wank, maybe a blow now and then. And he brings his own tissues whenever he just wants my hand! He's that sort of guy –

and I felt cheap then 'cos I had thought he was maybe a creep. He was just being polite. When you walk here you forget what that means – some of these guys are terrible to me. Just 'cos I make them pay a little more they think they can call me "bitch" or whatever they like. Especially those fuckers in their big fancy cars – they say "What's a beautiful girl like *you* doing round here?" They like it that I'm different-looking to the others – but when I go down on them then their colours show. These white fuckers with beards and big bellies. "Suck it bitch, suck it." That's what they say when they don't know me. And they try to choke me with their fucking stinking cocks. And, you know what, I bit this fucker once. Christ, did he scream! "Don't call me bitch," I said – real quiet-like, you know, like a Tough Girl! He never did come back, that one! Thank fuck!'

'But aren't you scared that someone like that might come back looking for you?'

'Naaah! Not someone like him. He lives in fucking Hampstead and owns some company. Got a wife and kids. Got their picture in his car. Can you believe that – the same car where he wants to be sucked off by me. No, he was fucking scared of me. "I'm sorry, I'm so sorry, I got carried away," he said in his poncey accent. "Well, next time, get carried away with your wife!" I said to him. I was real mean then. I got out, left him holding his cock like it was gonna fall off any minute. An' I'd only gone an' fucking nipped him.'

'But, still, there're some real crazies out there, crawling along in their cars.'

'You don't have to tell me, man! But some of these girls, they're so desperate, they'll go with anyone. It's fucking dangerous, this game. I've had a few scrapes along the way but I'm more careful than the others. I'll speak to the guy through the window before I get in – if I suss that he's bad then I just don't get in even if he offers me double the money. What good's fifty quid if he sticks a knife in my head?'

The relatively recent change in the kerb-crawling law superficially helps women by shifting at least part of the 'criminal' responsibility onto the men driving slowly in search of a pick-up. Yet, in reality, it has exposed the prostitutes to even further danger. Leila knew this all too well, linking the fear of the punters with the ineptitude of the law.

'The streets are crawling with fucking police most nights. I moved down from Stamford Hill to Notting Hill because I thought it would be less heavy 'cos, see, Stamford Hill was a touchy area. There're lots of those Orthodox Jews living round there. They were complaining about the street-girls. I could understand that. One night this girl was walking home. I saw her get off the night bus. I knew, obviously, that she was no hooker. She was scared, walking there. I felt sorry for her. Then this car comes up. Another white beardo! He's giving her the tongue, a bit of mouth. "How much, honey? How much do you charge?" This girl's fucking dying on her feet. So I walk over there. I'm a Tough Girl, right? An' I say to this guy, "Fuck off, man, if you don't want the police on your butt!" He roars away – and this girl just runs from me. I think she thought I was crazy. But, you know, I felt bad for her. It's not right that an innocent thing like her should be hassled.

'So I can understand why everyone's complaining. Prostitution shouldn't go on just like that – it should be somewhere safe, somewhere professional-like. Instead, they change the fucking law, make it even worse for us. They take down the punter's number-plates and they send a letter to his home. The wife opens it – all hell breaks out then, man! So these guys are fucking scared of being seen by the police. So when they pick up a girl they want her to just jump in before the police can say they've been talking about sex! Fucking stupid law if you ask me! I won't jump in. I lean down and I look at the fucker. He asks if I'm doing business. "Are *you* looking for business?" I ask them. Gives me more time to look at them. Then

we go through the prices. By then I have some sort of idea who I'm dealing with . . .

'But, shit, what happens then is that you get bust by the police. I've had three convictions already. I could've stayed clean, maybe, but my life means more to me than having to go to court, to be called a whore. So I get bust every now and then. They know me, the police – but I only work some nights of the week so they let me go now and then. They know it's a fucking stupid law too.'

I had also found that to be true. One night, while walking down to Leila's tree, I spotted an unmarked police surveillance car. In the eternal triangle of prostitutes, punters and police I knew by then with whom my heart lay – however, trying to be diligent, I bent down alongside the car and, to the initially flabbergasted vice squad detective, confessed my interest in the subject. After a few cautious questions, supposedly to ascertain whether or not I was completely insane, he suggested I get into the back seat so as not to draw undue attention to their activities. The two detectives were friendly enough but any scepticism they felt towards the current laws on prostitution were diplomatically couched in 'we're not the law-makers' terms. They said that I could join them on one of their 'street raids', once I had cleared my credentials with the central police station at Paddington. But I found it a dispiriting thought to spend five or six hours in a police van sweeping up and down the streets, arresting prostitutes. I knew that, especially in my presence, the arrests would be carried out with a gently bantering tone of resignation from both the police and the prostitutes. Yet it would have been a grim, pointless experience to see Leila being bundled into the back of a police van in the bleakest hours of the morning – an experience too redolent of those days when I taught in Soweto. I was sure that time would be better served on the other side of the line, talking with Leila.

'I'm lucky,' she continued. 'If I have to spend a night in jail I can deal with it. What about these women who have

children? They can take your children away. They can call you an unfit mother – no matter how much you're fucking struggling to keep your family together, to put decent food on the table, clean clothes on their little backs. Shit, those women have it bad. They're even less choosy than me, they take more risks. And, look how much more they've got to lose than me – they could lose their children, man! That kills them off then . . .'

I told Leila about Sarita, a thirty-five-year-old Indian prostitute, who worked the streets a few blocks from her. Her husband died two years ago and, as a mother of five children, she couldn't struggle through to the end of every week on her meagre housing and child benefits. So she turned to prostitution and now lived in constant fear – not only of the men and the police but of losing her children.

'Yeah, I know all about her,' Leila sighed. 'She's pathetic really. She's getting drunk now most nights just to get through it. I'm sorry for her but, shit, you must watch yourself with her. She's really desperate!'

I knew what Leila meant. The first few times I spoke to Sarita I felt heart-sore; so much so that I started to give her money, the odd £20 here and there. She was so wild that she literally snatched the money from me. When she realized, moreover, that I didn't want sex or even a blow-job from her, her face lit up and she asked if I could give her a couple of beers too. She was the first and only prostitute I gave money to. But her stories were so rambling and broken-up by grief that I felt unable to switch my tape-recorder on when I was with her.

Then, just after the arrival of the 'melonheads', she started turning up at my door at all hours of the early morning. 'Dave! Dave!' she'd holler, somehow convinced that this was my name. As soon as I opened the door, even if at some bleary-eyed hour, she'd say, 'Are you busy, Dave?'

'Busy sleeping,' I would moan.

'Oh sorry, Dave, but I'm desperate, Dave! I just come

out of Holloway [Prison] and I've got no money. I've got to pay the fine first thing tomorrow and I've got no money. I'll suck you sweet, Dave, I just need the money! Otherwise, man, I'm gonna lose my children!'

And so I gave her the money, *sans fellatio*, knowing that her promise to pay me back would be soon forgotten. But I could see myself being pulled into this unending, downward spiral and I had neither the money nor the hope that such 'loans' were the best way of helping her. The third time she came with the same story, I'm ashamed to admit, I was cruel to her. I told her that I just didn't have the money, that she had to somehow stop this relentless routine. I told her not to come back, I was tired of being woken up every other morning round three or four o'clock when I was still half-expecting to hear another snatch of the dreaded 'melonhead' refrain.

'Don't hate me, Dave,' she said pitifully. 'You've been OK to me, man. Just forget I asked. I'll be OK. Such is life, hey?'

And then she was gone and she never did come back, except in my head when I was struck by the ambiguity of this book and the sometimes seemingly dubious motives behind its writing. She always used to say 'Such is life, hey?' whenever she had just regaled me with the turbulent events of yet another tragic night.

'Hey, man,' Leila said kindly. 'You did more than enough for her!'

I hardly believed that.

'Fuck, man, of course you did. You see, with someone like her the problem's too big. You can't just plug it with your money. She needs something more than that. This is the way some of these women live. They walk the streets 'cos they need the money. So they get arrested, then they get fined £50 the next morning in court for soliciting and they go right back out onto the streets to earn the fine money. That's how this stupid game works. We know it, the police know it, the fucking magistrates know it. It's a fucking sad joke, man.

'And that Sarita, she's not gonna change, man. She'll just keep on coming to you, sucking you dry because it's easier sponging off a sucker than going down on one of those fuckers. Anyway, if you start with her, then why don't you give money to the next one too. You can bet *her* story'll also just break your heart. No, man, you just write the truth about what you see, about what we tell you. You're a writer, you're not some fucking social worker – and thank fuck for that, otherwise you wouldn't be letting me get drunk on your Scotch!'

She was right, in a way, and I liked her even more for trying to smooth away my most troubled doubts – such as the terrible fact that I was frightened by the unquenchable desperation eating into the heart of a prostitute like Sarita. But, as Leila said, the desolate well of aching street stories was similarly bottomless. Her own story was all the more moving for her vitriolic urgency and certainty that she was on the verge of breaking free from the violent spell of 'Tyson'.

'I was such a kid when I met "Tyson". I thought he cared about me for a while and I loved him once. Can't believe it now. Can't believe that I started hooking for *him*. But I'm getting ready to move on, off the street. I've had it with this sort of prostitution. Maybe if I was working in one of those weird window-rooms in Amsterdam I'd feel better about it. But not on the corner here, not under my tree. I'm sick of being fucked-up because I'm better than some bastard like "Tyson". You know, man, he tried to break me but he couldn't. I'm tougher than him, I feel stronger than him – on the inside, you know. I'm like my old tree, I've been battered a bit but I'm still swaying in the rain, I'm still standing. And I've got a plan now, I've got a plan to get away – and I'm gonna do it, I'm gonna leave that sucker eating my dust. An', you know, I am gonna be a rapper, I know that – you believe in me too, don'tcha?'

We looked out at the bleak grey light of early morning. If the Scotch hadn't been humming through us the setting

would have seemed absurdly sentimental. But I did believe in Leila and it was easy to say 'you know I do' and to have one last drink to her dream of leaving that tree for another kind of life.

In the next few weeks I bumped into two of the most significant men from her previous life. Yet it should be said that 'Tyson' was the one who came closest to doing the bumping when he passed me in his Mustang. 'Yo!' he shouted from the car window. I walked over warily, uncertain if he even knew who I was. He did. 'Where's fucking Leila?' he asked.

I knew that she had gone to a home for young battered women in Ealing, a kind of strictly barricaded version of a YWCA. She used to call me from the phone booth in the red-floored hallways - 'Red floors,' she'd laugh. 'Can you fucking believe this place!' – and send me postcards full of faintly antiquated hip-hop terminology ('def' and 'homey' and 'fresh' and 'wicked' and 'sucker MC') telling me how well she was doing. So I shrugged helplessly at 'Tyson' and he poured out a tirade saying that she'd come back to him on her fucking knees after another pimp, a pimp worse than him, had slashed open her face. He'd taken care of her, he'd fucking looked after that bitch, and *this* was how she thanked him for it! If I saw her I was to tell her that 'Tyson' was waiting, waiting for her to come crawling back to his stable.

He was a formidable orator – sort of a down-market Portobello Road version of Don King, the real Mighty Mike's colourfully deceitful mentor. Intoxicated by his scalding use of the mixed metaphor, I asked him if he wanted to come inside for an interview. But before I could entice him even further by letting him know, as I had done with Colin Dugmore, that other pugilistic connoisseur, that I'd interviewed the original American version, this local 'Tyson' stuck a finger up at me and screamed 'Go suck dick, motherfucker!' His voice was then swallowed by the screech of his mustardy Mustang roaring off into the night.

As was more fitting from Stillman, he glided to a more fluid halt alongside me a few evenings later, when I was walking down the same street. His window was already rolled down to catch the hissing spray from the wet road. He was out on the street much earlier than usual. I guessed who he was looking for even before his own question echoed her pimp's. The only difference being that he replaced 'Tyson's' 'Yo!' with a more refined nod.

'Have you seen Leila?' he asked softly.

'Leila's gone,' I said.

'Gone for good?' he asked more anxiously.

'I think so, yes.'

He was quiet, with his head cocked slightly to one side as if he was listening to the smoothness of his engine. After a while, still holding his head that way, he said, 'She always said she'd leave soon.' Abruptly, he looked up at me. 'Is she all right?'

'She sounds fine.'

'Maybe she will be a pop star, after all!' he said with a trace of the first smile I had ever seen him make.

'Yeah, maybe she will,' I said, liking her old 'Still Man'.

'There's a new girl under her tree now,' he murmured.

'Do you know her?' I asked.

'No . . . not yet. I've been looking too hard for Leila. I miss her. I liked Leila . . .'

Without another word, Stillman, the secret virtuoso, slid his grey ghost of a car into first and, with another vague smile, he drove away, down towards the tree where Leila had once stood.

Chapter Fourteen

Greta, Garbo, Madonna and the TV Queen

Leila's leaving coincided with the arrival of a new year. I took this as a sign that I was approaching the end of a journey which had unfolded inside me as much as it had run through London's different worlds of prostitution. For Mandy Kavanagh, the end of another year meant that she was less than three months away from the culmination of her career as 'The Terminator Angel'. It was this thought which persuaded me to distance her from the continuing attentions of the well-paid 'melonhead' faction.

Her encounters with Alistair were already being intensified by his refusal to believe that their sessions were drawing to a close. I was sure that my grievances would not help her. The last thing she needed, she said to me one afternoon, was to have an ironic charge of murderous assault laid at her door 'if things were ever to get out of hand' in her basement. She had little doubt that she, the prostitute, would not be the recipient of any judicial favours in such a macabre scenario.

Consequently, my run-ins with Alistair's boys were consigned to a more appropriate personal slot. The worst of the violence, anyway, had apparently passed and there were only two incidents with which to see the old year out. The first entailed being spat on in a tube tunnel by my two old cronies, before they were engulfed by a drunken stream of office workers doing their good deed for the week. Whether that lost the 'melonheads' their job remained uncertain but a week later someone new was sent to deliver

a message to me. I was walking down a street in Notting Hill, wondering if it was about to rain, when my name was called out. As I turned I realized that the caller was running, his feet sending out an insistent rhythm of threat. By then it was too late to take note of the warning. I stared straight into a blurring, ring-glistening fist which had already, almost miraculously, turned itself into a dark brute of a punch. I swayed beneath that slug of lightning, barely noticing the hooded reflection of my silent assailant disappearing down a side street.

'Oh my God, he just hit you! Did you see that? He just hit you!' a startled woman screamed from the other side of the road. I was inclined to wearily point out that I had felt, rather than seen, his punch but she was already running over to me, offering her handkerchief. Like her pearls, it was cream-coloured. She was kind but as she kept asking, 'Why did he hit you, oh my God, why did he hit you?' I could not stop the churlish thought that she probably despised prostitutes. It was a stupid, lightning-struck perception and I immediately felt the worse for it. So, instead of bloodying her pristine hankie, framed as it was with a pattern of yellow roses, I used my grubbier sleeve to wipe my lip and tried to find the appropriate words of thanks to gracefully end that jarring encounter.

Whether the hired gang knew it or not, the effects of their random attacks were starting to corrode my will to finish the writing of this book. But, yet again, I was lucky. I had become friends with a prostitute in Maida Vale, a woman called Greta Kemp. She was in her middle-thirties and, as both her name and the inside of her flat indicated, she had modelled herself on Garbo – presenting a striking pastiche of a beautifully mysterious, husky-voiced blonde. Greta's advert stood out in a newsagent's shop window because it was so different to the rest. Alongside an elegant sketch of a typical *Great Gatsby*-style bobbed girl, these exotic words were printed in refined typeset: 'Gentlemen Prefer Blonde Flappers'.

Immersed in sado-masochistic terminology I wondered if a 'flapper' was some new kind of Dominatrix I had yet to decipher. But the closer I looked at Greta's daisy-yellow card the clearer I came to understand that 'flapper', here, was being used in its original F. Scott Fitzgerald sense of denoting a demure, pretty 'society' girl on the breathless verge of claiming sexual liberation and her own hedonistic right to party. When I phoned the Maida Vale 'flapper' I was intrigued further by her answerphone message which apologized for the fact that she was unable to take any appointments until the following week as she, Greta, was 'away in Paris, playing bridge'. When the beep came for me to leave a message I tamely hung up. Instead, I really wanted to applaud the sheer ostentation of this Paris bridge-playing prostitute. There was something almost thrillingly defiant about this conceit. It was as if Greta, with her flapping and her bridge, had instantly demolished the worn cliché of the miserably down-trodden whore.

After the despair of 'Tyson's' Myra and Sarita, Greta seemed sleekly bohemian. And if Mandy Kavanagh was the deconstructivist whore, more likely to call on Foucault than Fitzgerald for philosophical remuneration, then Greta Kemp personified a more sumptuous kind of sex-industry decadence; yet 'decadence' only in the sense that she practised prostitution which was not so much 'post-Big Bang modernism' than 'pre-Crash revelry', the Wall Street Crash of 1929.

There was no apparent hint of 1990s' recession in anything that Greta did. When I first met her, *après* her Paris jaunt, she served me champagne at three in the afternoon and cancelled two appointments with clients because she felt 'like talking rather than fucking'. When she did see clients she also insisted that they have 'a chat and a drink first' – despite this running contrary to more mundane prostituting methods of getting down to the essential business of sex as soon as possible. But Greta preferred a leisurely approach

– it meant less money but, in her words, 'more of the most important thing – *pleasure*'.

Bridge, Paris and silent movies were the prime constituents of Greta's pleasure. Not being exactly a bridgey type of guy I was happier talking to her about Paris and Simone Maillard – whose forbidding work with the poker induced shudders of revulsion in the Maida Vale flapper. 'But, sweetie,' she'd wail, 'where's the pleasure in *that*?' For Greta, pleasure and prostitution were not mutually exclusive entities. As long as she made time to enjoy herself blissfully at the bridge table, at Longchamp and at the NFT's silent movie seasons she found herself able to translate some of that rapture into her prostitution.

It was refreshing to visit Greta because she was oblivious to the 1990s' demands to keep pace with the deluge of both political upheaval and cultural consumerism. To enter Greta's home was to waft into a domain where not only ethnic conflict and serial-killing had yet to be imagined but where it appeared that it was 1927 forevermore. Garbo, in this world, would never have had to talk. Greta's hallway, front-room and bedroom were glittering celebrations of the 1920s with gramophones, Bix Beiderbecke records, cut-glass bowls, feather-boas, silk curtains and photographs of Lillian Gish, Louise Brooks, Scott and Zelda Fitzgerald, Noel Coward, Josephine Baker, Anna Akhmatova and the definitive Garbos bequeathing a surreal homage to this mythic time. The only lapse in an otherwise immaculate time-capsule was the blown-up photograph of Vivien Leigh and Clark Gable, from *Gone With The Wind*, the only 'talkie' which Greta appeared remotely interested in discussing.

As her sole concession to any long-term concept of work resided in her vague plans to 'one day' become a professional bridge player, Greta made me feel like the most dedicated soul she had ever met. 'Oh, Donald dear,' she'd sigh, 'I so admire your discipline,' when I'd turn down invitations from her to learn bridge or to join her for early evening cocktails

on the pretext of having to write instead. She'd then also stress that she found 'obsessional men so interesting'. On the quiet, I rather liked being thought of as 'obsessional' and so Greta, for this insight, went up another notch in my estimation.

When she phoned me not long after I was on the rebound from that last punch, I was glad to receive an invitation to join her at the NFT for a double-bill of King Vidor movies. Greta picked me up in her open-backed convertible which may have been a 1950s model but, with its cream colouring and red-leather seats, felt more like a Jay Gatsby-style car. Even though the sky above us on that early Friday afternoon was grey rather than blue it felt, as Greta said, 'kind of grand to be tootling along' with the hood down and her silk scarf flapping appropriately in the cold wind.

After the elongated session of King Vidor's piano-plonking dramatics I felt reluctant to return home on the off-chance of crashing into more early evening trauma. Dinner with the gushingly Gish-flushed Greta was a more attractive proposition. Selecting her favourite Kensington brasserie, Greta thanked me for taking her out even before we had sat down. One of the ancient principles of flapping pleasure, supposedly, was that the 'man always paid' – it also seemed to me a slick 'Pumps'-like device, to wipe the question of payment off the agenda before anything else was contemplated. With this little matter settled, Greta ordered the two most expensive dishes on the menu for herself and sought out the bottle of wine whose vintage stretched furthest back, to 1927. Once she had located this prize, she promptly ordered two bottles to be brought to our table.

All this was done with an extravagance which was almost scandalously addictive. A similarly mirthful man wearing a cravat obviously thought so too because, before long, he had sent a single rose to our table. He waved flamboyantly at Greta when she looked around, with a blush of colour rising to her cheeks, for her admirer. Spotting him at last

she mouthed fish-in-a-bowl like 'thank yous' and blew a pair of perfumed kisses his way. If I had not been a hardened veteran of such occasions – where the woman you are with in a restaurant is sent flowers by another man who has reached the conclusion that such a beauty could never be interested in the ragged loser strangely sharing her table – I would probably have been taken aback by this turn of events.

Instead, I smiled at Greta's delight and compared her vivacity with Mandy Kavanagh's more rigorous dismissal when the same thing happened to us in a restaurant not far from this one. Perhaps Kensington is the last refuge of romantic rose-senders? When a smouldering city-type sent three red roses to her, Mandy politely refused to accept them. When he insisted that the bewildered waiter return with the proffered floral gift I had to bite my lip to stifle the giggles as she ground her teeth and, in her stainless accent, enunciated clearly: 'Please tell him that I can't possibly accept these flowers. It's really ridiculous, I don't even know the man!'

Where Mandy saw such pushy adoration as yet another example of aggressive masculine delusion, Greta simply basked, as she breathed huskily across the table at me, in the 'pleasure of being a woman'. I, meanwhile, paused to consider whether these rosy tributes had more to do with prostitution than with my own apparent unsuitability as a matchingly attractive dinner-table companion. I wondered if the flower-senders had subliminally picked up on the 'professional' sexuality inherent to the women's work. However, as both Mandy and Greta were much closer to the public preconception of 'starlets' than 'hookers', I had to settle on the briefly uncomfortable conclusion that, in the eyes of most people, I didn't conform to the conventional image of a 'hunky leading-man'.

But that was an unconventional kind of night and so I told Greta about Mandy's similar experience. I also knew that Greta, with her proudly declared bisexual tendencies,

had a less than secret lust to, as she shyly described it, 'bed Mandy'. As this was unlikely to happen, she hoped to convince the imminently retiring 'Terminator Angel' to start up London's most prestigious escort agency with her. 'We'd be a runaway success, darling,' she murmured seductively to me. 'Come on, if you can convince her to work with me I'll even make sure you get ten per cent of the takings! Just think, you'll never have to work again!' The thought of being an escort agency entrepreneur made me frown and immediately Greta held her hands up to her face in mock-horror: 'Oh no, I forgot! You're one of those outrageous ones who *likes* to work! That's blown my chances with Mandy forever now!'

That mention of work encouraged Greta to politely switch the conversation to the topic of this book. 'So how's the writing coming along, Scottie?' she asked – 'Scottie' being the highest compliment she could pay me because, by her reckoning, no writer existed after Fitzgerald for he had made her 'literally die with the beauty' of his words in *Tender Is The Night*.

I told her that it had ground to a threatened halt, following the tumult of the past few months. The 'season of violence' had left me frayed and vulnerable. From Mandy's 'House of Pain' and Simone Maillard's 'Bitch Of Pain', through Colin Dugmore's and Vince Tuck's S&M, and into the beatings of 'Tyson' and my personalized 'melonhead' crew, an overwhelming malady of violence had been at work. Greta's clucking noises of sympathy were interrupted by a sudden flare of recognition.

'Vince who?' she asked.

'Tuck, I think, Vince Tuck,' I replied.

'I probably shouldn't tell you this because you'll hate me for it . . .'

I knew she was going to tell me anyway so I supplied the obligatory 'What?'

'I know Vince Tuck,' she said sadly.

'You do?' I gaped. Vince was the last association I would

have made with the pleasure-seeking Maida Vale flapper. She clearly had not met him on one of her bridge-playing jaunts to Paris.

A long time ago, Greta told me nervously, she had got 'mixed-up with a bad crowd'. By 'bad' she meant the National Front, of whom Vince Tuck had been a member before breaking away to join the rival British Movement. She hadn't told me this before because, although I hadn't 'made any speeches about it', she could tell that I 'hated fascists'. The few things I had told her about teaching in Soweto and avoiding the then compulsory military call-up to the South African army had convinced her that I would despise her if I knew she had once belonged to the National Front. Moreover, she had been recruited by the Ku Klux Klan to work with a small cell in the early 1980s when a serious attempt had been made to set up a wing of Deep South racism in Britain.

I was more stunned than offended by her 'confession' which began to take on tremblingly epic proportions as she denounced these past activities as 'sick and confused'. She had only been a member of the Front for a year and she had left in angry despair when its philosophies of racial grandeur finally revealed themselves to be 'terribly wrong and inhumane'. Greta had only just begun on the cleansing story of how she then fell in love with a black man and how she also adored Josephine Baker, Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong and admired my friendship with 'that Leila girl' when I held up my hand in surrender.

'So you really hate me, then?' she asked, on the verge of tears. I told her I didn't, although I thought she'd been desperately foolish to get entangled with the NF and the Klan. I had known enough deluded but good-natured South African fascists not to want to storm out of the restaurant in a fit of liberal pique.

'So, does this mean you're still my friend?' she asked.

'I guess it does,' I said, thinking that the Confederacy flag

on her wall was probably less a *Gone With The Wind* gesture than I had initially imagined.

Greta was on a roll. Seeing that I was such an obviously 'sensitive, compassionate and deeply understanding sort of guy' she had 'two more confessions to make'. I tried to look a little more judgemental as I thought that one confession would suffice for the night. The couple at the next table apparently disagreed, judging from the way they had silently listened to our conversation for the last half an hour. Our swift flick through King Vidor, roses, escort agencies, sado-masochistic sex, physical assaults and then the Ku Klux Klan had put some kind of dampener on the previous spark of their own conversation. The way in which the man leaned over towards our table made me realize that he was more keen than I to hear further talk from the living Garbo-doll.

Greta's second confession, in an unstoppable series of three, was that she found me to be 'very attractive'. With some chagrin I noticed the woman opposite me raise her eyebrows at her husband. She was, plainly, not a believer in my irresistible magnetism. I tried to ignore her and concentrate on Greta instead. Confession number three looked as if it could be one of those embarrassing ones, where it was revealed that a secret fantasy was about to be brought into reality and I would be expected to perform feats of gymnastic copulation on the restaurant table, for Greta was so aflame with passion that she could restrain herself no longer. The salivating couple and I waited anxiously for the third bombshell to drop. It was certain to fall at any moment, the only question being whether it would be ideologically 'Aryan' or seductively 'blonde'.

'How would you feel about the fact . . .' Greta said with excruciating caution. I felt all four of us take a deep breath. Greta began again, speaking more quickly this time. 'How would you feel . . . if I told you that I was once a man?'

The full enormity of that fact penetrated the quicker mind of the listening man first. During the extended pause between

Greta's two 'How would you feel?' introductions he had snuck in a quick slurp of coffee. Somehow, his engrossed intake of breath and of coffee criss-crossed each other in the pure shock of the moment. Coffee came gushing out of his spluttering nose, spraying his wife with brown flecks. Greta appeared not to notice this Vesuvian-like explosion, so intent was she in gauging my own response to her startling revelation.

As soon as I had stopped staring wide-eyed at the couple's efforts to hide their acute flustering, the full impact of Greta's words sank in. I knew that she was telling the truth. There had always been something indefinably mysterious about Greta – when people used to ask how old she was I would reply, 'Well she looks about thirty but she's got such a deep voice that on the telephone it sounds like she's more like fifty.' When my eyes shifted back to her troubled, expectant face I imagined I saw her then as a little boy. I felt a bare chill rush through me then.

'Do you believe me,' Greta asked, 'that I've had a sex change?'

'Yes, I believe you,' I said weakly.

As they were now calling urgently for their bill I felt able at last to direct a 'serves you right' look in the couple's direction. Although she was less concerned with their reaction than with giving me time to absorb her news, Greta waited for the eavesdroppers to scurry away with an anecdote and a half to dish out at their next fondue evening. Then, as I looked back at her, she said, 'Well, how does it make you feel?'

'It makes me feel strange, Greta,' I said, inadvertently bringing my legs together under the table in order to provide the jewels of my own manhood with a gesture of needed reassurance. 'To be honest, when you told me, I felt a little chilled.'

'Oh no,' she said softly.

It was then, for the first time, that a more poignant truth struck home. As I noticed the steady pulsing of her lower

lip, I felt the full force of the bravery it must have taken not only to become a transsexual but for her then to tell someone like me; someone who had never doubted that she had always been a woman, someone with whom, only a few minutes before, she was engaging in some serious flirtation. It suddenly seemed a matter of dire urgency to smooth away those rough edges to my response.

'What I really mean,' I floundered, 'is that it's just a bit of a shock. I never for a moment, Greta, thought you were anything but a woman.'

'I'm so flattered,' she said seriously, her hands fussing busily with her hair. In that moment, and it disclosed much of my own prejudice, she became garishly camp in my eyes – looking for all the world like a man trying to be a woman. Yet, at the same time, I knew that if she had kept silent about this deepest secret I would have looked more fondly on the attention she then paid to her hair – and if pushed I might have wondered why, as a slovenly man, I didn't show my own undisciplined head of hair that kind of respect.

Greta told me that I was only the second 'post-op' person to whom she had told this story. She had kept a few of her best, more open-minded friends from those days when she was a more plain 'Grant', but the remainder of her social circle consisted of people who had no idea of her previous life. The first recipient of the news had been Jeremy, the man with whom she still shared the flat in Maida Vale. Although theirs was now a platonic relationship, he had been one of her first clients when she started working as a prostitute. He had fallen in love with her, left his wife and children and bought the current flat for them to live in. Still feeling relatively insecure about her newly acquired femininity, she had been too frightened to tell Jeremy the truth – and, in a way, she felt she had been proved right, for after they had agreed that their relationship should be 'non-sexual' she told him about her past life. Jeremy went into such a profound state of shock that he had been in Freudian analysis ever since.

I liked Jeremy. He was a reserved man with a handlebar moustache. But his shyness couldn't hide his zealotry for bridge. It had been Jeremy who first introduced Greta to the game. With such a secret between them, despite the need for psychological therapy, I figured that they must have made a formidable team when it came to bluffing their opponents in Paris.

But why had she told me, a relative stranger, about her transsexuality?

'Because I trust you,' she said simply.

In a peculiar way, it was a burden to have such trust invested in me. Furthermore, the most pedestrian moments suddenly appeared charged with echoing resonances. When I said, while waiting for the bill to arrive, 'Man, service sure is slow tonight,' I squirmed at my seeming gaffe – but Greta was too immersed in blowing another kiss to her flowery fan to notice. 'If only you knew, pal,' I thought as I watched him drunkenly accept her imaginary kiss and then send one of his own wafting across the room.

Greta's skin, looking soft and lustrous, did not hold any clues to her former sexuality and it was only when, much to my consternation, she 'slipped into something more comfortable' at home that I noticed a more telling pointer to the lost life of Grant. As Greta, clad in a silk kimono, served coffee and Calvados, I couldn't drag my eyes away from the size of her hands and feet; especially her feet, for they seemed, well, man-size. Fortunately, Jeremy was with us and he and Greta were soon lost in a kind of bridgean-stupor as they discussed some obscure ramification of a game they had played the night before.

After he made his polite excuses and left the room and shortly before I made my own, Greta movingly told me of the emotional pain she had endured during her adolescence and university life. As homophobic schoolboys, my friends and I had always been making what we considered to be hilarious jokes about a specific male teacher really being 'a woman trapped inside a man's body'. That crack seemed

terribly cruel when Greta detailed the confusion and terror of an unimagined existence. It was only when her application for a sex change was finally accepted, after two years of stringent psycho-analytical tests, that she felt her life was at last beginning. She also spoke lyrically about the gradual transformation that emerged during the ensuing years of hormonal treatment and then, finally, about the day when she woke up, not as Grant, but as Greta.

Greta Kemp's sex-change diverted my attention away from the rusting fear of another visit from Alistair's boys. I found myself once more perusing the personal columns of the local papers. Alongside the highlighted and boxed celebrations of Sara Dale and 'Pumps', I noticed that the euphemistic 'massage' column was spiced with more than a sprinkling of transvestite and transsexual advertisers. 'Busty, Leggy, Beautiful TS – Elle'; 'Smooth, Slinky, Sexy Madonna TV'; 'Pre-Op TV/TS – Leslie'; 'Submissive TV – Willing To Please. Party Invites A Speciality'. At least a fifth of the nimble-fingered masseurs that week were gender-stretchers and, as I rifled through my telephone booth memories, I recalled how many similar such TS and, especially, TV adverts I had seen over the last year.

I noticed that 'Elle' shared the same Holland Park telephone number as 'Ken & Barbie – A Hot Young Couple Put On A Show Beyond Your Wildest Dreams' and 'Big, Beautiful Belinda – 48" chest'. So down I strolled to the wealthier sector of W11 and, even having prepared myself for some kind of outrageous brothel setting, I was still surprised to find the basement flat door being opened by a voluptuous, completely nude girl, in her early twenties. This was 'Elle'. Her advert had not been exaggerating. But, with the telephone ringing constantly and the equally naked Belinda running from room to room trying to keep track of their various appointments, it was a farcical setting in which to attempt an incisive exploration of transsexual prostitution. 'Elle', it turned out, was also 'Barbie' and

she and 'Ken' were already late for a £100 show in Marble Arch.

In between the thumping House soundtrack echoing through the flat ('We just *lurve* to dance!' 'Elle' squealed as she reluctantly dragged on some clothes), she told me that her operation had been successfully completed two years ago. She and her friends, 'Ken' and 'Belinda', as their accents confirmed, were from Perth, Australia, and they were doing sex work to finance their extended European holiday. Paris was going to be their next stop – once they had made enough money in London to support themselves for six months.

'I guess it beats washing dishes and back-packing,' I shouted above Farley Jackmaster Funk.

'You bet it does, baby,' 'Elle' chortled as she flashed those dancing breasts at me one more time before pulling her dress over her dark, curly hair. 'I just love this dress,' she sighed blissfully, 'I just love all dresses!' The more earthy 'Ken' shouted from the next room – 'Come on, we're fucking ten minutes late already.'

With a breathless invitation for me to come back another day, 'Elle' flew out the door – now in her 'Barbie', rather than transsexual, role. I never did make it back to that sexy, terminally dancing house for, that same afternoon, I met the definitive 'Smooth, Slinky, Sexy Madonna TV' Queen.

Across town, Greta, 'Elle' and probably 'Barbie' too, seemed like women almost as blessed as the divine La Ciccone. I learnt this not long after I met Tim, Marylebone's answer to Madonna.

When I spoke to him first on the phone, unlike with both Greta and 'Elle', it was hard not to notice that he was a man – or, at the very least, a boy in his late teens – even though he tried to approximate a girly voice.

'You know that I'm a TV, then?' he asked coquettishly after he had already agreed that I could visit, and if we got along, interview him.

'Yeah, your advert said so.'

'Well, terrific then, Don! So you like Madonna?'

'I do.'

'Oh wonderful! You'll like me a lot then!'

'Do you dress up like her?' I asked curiously.

'You naughty boy!' he scolded me down the phone.

'Why?'

'You're not coming for a show – you're coming to be serious.'

'I guess you're right,' I said.

'Oh well, I'm going to tell you later anyway. So the answer is yes,' he cooed triumphantly.

'Yes, what?' I asked, having already forgotten the question.

'Yes, I *do* dress up as Madonna!'

'Oh right! That's great!'

'Would you like me to dress up for your visit?' he inquired provocatively.

'Errr . . . well, you really don't need to,' I said, suddenly feeling defensively macho.

'Oh, but I'll do it for you – seeing you're such a fan! But first, you gotta tell me one thing, hunky.'

'Hunky?' I mused silently on 'hunky'. I wasn't sure that I liked it. I'd been called a few pet-names down the prostitution line – 'angel', 'baby', 'cutie', 'Donnie-Boy', 'fuck-face', 'honey', 'mother-fucker', 'Scottie', 'sweetie' – the list seemed endless. But 'hunky?' That was a new one.

'You gotta tell me your favourite Madonna song!' he giggled.

'Ummmm – *Into The Groove*, maybe?'

'Oh yeah – that's one of my mine too!'

'No, maybe not. Uhhhhhh, probably *Angel*.'

'That's fantastic!' he literally screamed down the phone. 'No-one's *ever* said that to me! And you know what, hunky?'

I wanted to say that I knew that I didn't like being called 'hunky', especially by a transvestite I had yet to meet, but

diplomacy triumphed and I responded with a more neutral 'What?'

'It's *my* favourite, too!'

When he opened the door for me an hour later it really did look as if he was smitten with the song. He must have pushed the play button on his tiny tape recorder just before he let me into his council flat. As I stepped across the TV threshold I was greeted by that gloriously fake Madonna laugh which opens *Angel*. And there Tim was – wearing an impressive 'Madonna Platinum Blonde' tour wig, a pink jacket, lacy black bra, leopard-skin skirt, seamed stockings and red pumps. He also wore dark eyeshadow, red lipstick and a small, silver crucifix. It seemed as though, with the exception of the 1990-style wig, he modelled himself more on the Madonna of the *Like A Virgin* days even though his thin body had none of her more curvaceous form from the mid-1980s.

As I looked in wonderment at Tim, I heard Madonna sing in time to his grandiose miming welcome, 'Oooooooo, you're an angel, you must be an angel . . .' There was nothing I could do but watch, angelically, for there was no way that he was going to stop his adoring Madonna routine. As the song finally melted away to leave only the burr of traffic building up to rush-hour along the Marylebone Road, he breathlessly smoothed his hands over his bra and skirt, gave his crucifix a little kiss and me a bigger bow.

I didn't know what to say.

'This is the moment when I start undressing the guy,' Tim said helpfully. 'Hey, don't look so worried, hunky, I'll make us a cup of tea instead.'

And so we sat down with a pot of apple tea and, after he had poured the first cup, Tim finally took off his wig to reveal a shaven head. He looked impossibly young and vulnerable then, still wearing his make-up, and his face soon became besieged with trouble as he started to tell me about his prostitution as a TV 'Madonna'.

'I've been doing this for five months – this Madonna show-thing. I love her, Madonna, and some of the guys who come here seem to like it. But, Jesus, I never know which way they might go. You know, like I asked you on the phone, "What's your favourite Madonna song?" and you told me straight off – I have some guys shouting, "What are you, some kind of pervert?" All I want to know is if they like Madonna, if they have a favourite song of hers. They don't understand any of that. Then when they turn up, if they're not interested in my dancing they'll just snap the recorder off like it belongs to them. Sometimes it's horrible – they just want to fuck, never to even talk for a minute. I feel less than a person sometimes, when I have to go down on them or just bend over for them. I know I'm a prostitute, this is my job . . . but, still, it scares me sometimes.'

'Are they always angry?' I asked, unsettled by this harsh shift from Tim's jocular telephone and dancing mood.

'No, not all of them. Not the nice ones. Sometimes guys really get into the whole groove. Then it's fun. But they're the poorer ones. They don't come as often as the richer ones, the more aggressive ones.'

'Why do you think these guys are so angry?'

'I dunno, hunky – I just know that they can get very, very angry. Maybe 'cos they hate Madonna 'cos she's really strong you know, the kind of woman they could never have.'

'But they still have sex with you, even though they're angry?'

'Oh sure – it usually happens when they're at their angriest. "Fuck you bastard, fuck you bitch, fuck you bastard" . . .

'That's what this one guy says whenever he fucks me – he starts shouting it when he's gonna come. I think he's angry 'cos I'm really a boy . . .'

That kind of 'bastard-bitch-bastard' rant reminded me of the phrase Leila used to say haunted her the most – 'Suck

it, bitch, suck it . . .' And as Tim and I drank our apple tea I also thought back briefly to that night with Alistair when he said how he poured out all the anger and frustration he experienced in his 'ordinary' life into abusing 'a Chinatown whore' like Jackie. Then prostitution assumes its most grotesque function – when the prostitute is used not so much for sexual relief or redressing an exaggerated sense of power or responsibility but as a human dustbin fit only to be dumped on in some kind of raging wasteland.

Greta Kemp had also told me, on that night of her sex-change admission, that the prime reason behind her keeping her past life secret was her need to avoid such levels of abuse. As a woman prostitute she was still exposed to random outbreaks of vicious behaviour from some of her clients. Like all prostitutes she had learnt to restrict such incidents. However, if she was known to be a transsexual prostitute, she was convinced that she would be unable to stem the tide of ensuing abuse.

'In the eyes of many clients,' she said, 'the two lowest kind of whores are the transsexuals and the transvestites. It's as if we're freaks and therefore deserve what's coming to us. And those angry men, those men who are disgusted with their own pathetic lives, come to us when they want to get rid of some of those feelings. I've seen this happen all too often with transsexual and transvestite friends of mine. Because the prostitutes have dared to become women, the clients think they can do whatever they like to them. And you know how ordinary women prostitutes are unprotected by the police? Well, then, can you imagine what the police would say if you laid a complaint against a client and then admitted you were TS or TV? They'd either gape at you or just laugh.

'I've gone through all that enormous hurt you have to endure before you can change your sex – so I'm a little luckier now. People think I've always been a woman. But for the TVs it's very different. They're men – it's as simple as that, no matter how beautiful they may look wearing

stockings and lipstick. And the type of client who goes to a TV has bisexuality in him. This blurring of the sexes turns him on – which is great. Look at me, even after a sex change, I still desire women! But the problem comes when the client is homophobic – despite his desire. That's when his self-loathing spews out, that's when TVs and TSs, if they're not careful, get fucked around like they're just dogs . . .'

I told Tim what Greta had said to me and he answered, 'She's fucking right. We are at the bottom of the heap. And for me part of the problem is that, you know, I so want men to be turned on by me. I want to be wanted! So when they get randy because of the lipstick or the bra I'm wearing I'm sorta pleased. I'm doing my job. I'm desirable. And I find it hard to stop them twisting my head like I'm just a piece of dirt sucking them off. I get confused then. But I'm getting better at it these days. I'm not letting them get away with so much if I don't like it – it's 'cos I'm really getting good at being Madonna!

'I'll tell you a story, hunky, that might even have changed my life. I've started to do kiss-a-grams too, y'see! "Madonna TV Kiss-A-Grams!" It goes with the Madonna TV prostitution. So, last week, on my third job, I get sent down to this backroom in a pub in Vauxhall. It's some kind of boys' night – a stag night or something! It's fucking dark in this room – about ten guys there. They're all really pissed and the lights are turned down low. I come bursting out doing *Like A Virgin* – really giving it a tonk. Wow, hunky, the boys are going mad – they're whistling and yelling, pointing out the birthday boy or the groom or whatever. So, near the end of the song, I give him this long French kiss – it's a good one, everyone's going mad, jumping on tables. So I wave goodbye, still miming away, "Like a virgin, touched for the very first time . . ."

'But the boys want more – I'm *that* good. They want me to give their friend a special treat. "How much for a blow-job?" they ask. I hold up my hands – ten and ten

again. £20. OK – every one chips in a few pounds. So I take the lucky boy's hand and I walk towards the loo with him – "Oh no, Madonna!" scream the rest of them. They want to watch! Can you believe these fucking queens – and they're all pretending to be straight rugby players, the lot of them! So I give him his blow-job, condom included, and it takes about a minute. Not bad at the price.

'Now I really want to be going – but they start offering me £100 if I blow *all* of them. Jesus! I'm tempted! But they want me to do a strip first – even if, as the one fucker says, I'm "a bit flat!" Shit! It's only then I click that they *really* don't know I'm a boy. They think their friend's just been blown by a *girl*! I was flattered and all that but, Jesus, even in this light I can see they're big boys. They're not the sort who'll like this sort of mistake. The kiss-a-gram agency have made a big cock-up! I'm starting to worry now! So I tell this one guy, in my best Madonna voice, that I must go change into something sexier first. "Sure, go ahead, love!"

'So I saunter off into a small room at the side, just next to the door where I have to make my getaway. I take my skirt off, put on my flasher's mac, change into my Docs and I'm ready to run. I open the door – and I see that they're all sitting at the other side of the room. They've made a kind of stage for me. "Come over here, Madonna, come over here," they shout as the music starts up again – "Like a virgin, touched for the very first time." They're looking at me a little strangely now 'cos I've got my bag in my hand. But they still haven't clicked that I'm going to do a runner . . . they must have been so fucking drunk!

'And then, looking at all these rugby boys, I can't resist it. I put my bag carefully at the door and then I start to dance, still making sure that I'm a long way away from them. They're getting horny! When we hit the first chorus they're going mad. I suddenly whip open my mac. All they can see is my lacy bra and dangling willy! I wish I could have kept looking at their faces but I flashed shut and I

was outta there before any of them had even moved. Never ran so fast in my life, down an alley, over a wall and into a taxi. And as the taxi driver kept giving me these funny looks in his mirror, I started humming, hunky, 'cos I'd fooled 'em. "Like a virgin, touched for the very first time, like a virgin . . ." '

Chapter Fifteen

Filming for Company

To sustain his 'slinky Madonna' myth in the face of callous callers to his flat, Tim ran that memory through his mind as though it was a cherished scene from a favourite film. By remembering, he reaffirmed the wit and grace of his own transformation of self. Also, it confirmed again that his mirror did not lie. He could appear to others as he looked to himself. Whenever he doubted his own identity as a transvestite he fell back on his 'Madonna-gram' story as testimony to the fact that at least ten burly rugby-players had slid, however briefly, under his seductive spell.

But there were times when memory was not enough, when he needed to dredge hope from a more tangible source of proof. That was why, he said, he loved Matti McLean; for Matti has left him with something more than a memory. Matti had made him a video, Matti had turned him on to TV, Matti had captured him forever on screen.

Whenever Tim felt blue he reached for the video cassette marked 'To Madonna – From Matti, with Love'. He pushed the tape into his bulky old machine, pressed 'Play' and lay back in his apricot-coloured hammock as the images careered across his television. It began with a rapid series of jump-cuts, interspersing grainy, black-and-white impressions of Tim, as a boy, with the real Madonna in the full colour of her earliest, gaudiest pop videos. The sound also shifted from the sighing silences of Tim's flat to strident bursts of Madonna carolling the choruses to *Holiday* and

Material Girl. Then, slowly, the soundtracks began to merge as the Madonna videos were spliced into the same songs played on Tim's portable recorder as he began to change himself into her. *Like a Virgin*, inevitably, played as he finished undressing himself and began to apply make-up to his face. Maintaining the frenetic pace of his short film by bringing together a chain of images linking the various stages of Tim's transvestism, Matti then turned the video inside out by cutting back and forth between black and white images of Madonna's face rapping about Greta Garbo, Marilyn Monroe and Rita Hayworth in *Vogue* while Tim, resplendent in his slinkiest outfit, mouthed the same names as he flitted across the screen in bright colour. Then, she and he melted into one; and only a lone image of Madonna dancing in a council flat in Marylebone remained.

Matti McLean was a short man with a slight paunch, a silvery beard and a pair of steel-rimmed glasses. He wore checked wool-shirts, brown corduroy trousers and white trainers. Matti was convinced that he was a dead-ringer for Rainer Werner Fassbinder, the late German director of films like *In A Year With Thirteen Moons*, about the last five days in the life of a transsexual, the heartbreaking *Veronika Voss* and, Matti's favourite, *Querelle* – a lustrous, if often lugubrious, adaptation of Jean Genet's gay novel. Like Fassbinder, Matti McLean was gay and depressive although he was fortunate enough not to be, like his hero, in thrall to an overbearing mother. Matti was forty-seven years old, already ten years older than Fassbinder was when he died in the early 1980s, and his own parents lived happily together in a Cotswold cottage.

'I'm just looking for some of Fassbinder's creativity,' Matti said with deadly seriousness about ten minutes after we had first met in Tim's flat. 'But I don't want any of those Fassbinder-type problems 'cos I've got enough to deal with without taking on drugs and troublesome mothers!' He said these last words with a dry laugh, as much in recognition

of his obsession with Fassbinder as of his own prevailing predicament. Part of this trauma, he suggested, was that he was still in mourning for Brad Davis, the star of *Querelle*, who had died a few months previously from AIDS.

Matti's more personal problems, however, extended beyond the cinema screen. Initially, he appeared to echo Michael Bair, the long-standing client at 'Pumps'. Matti had also once frequented Howard Lambert's agency – a coincidence which did not seem strange when regarded in the light of the other linkages running through the world of prostitution – and, now in middle-age, he had similarly come to wonder if he would ever find himself in a committed relationship again. He had begun to think such thoughts during the preceding two years, for feelings of loss reverberated through that time. He had lost his job as an advertising director at the turn of the decade, 'in the first month of the 1990s', and a week later his younger lover walked out, claiming that he was unable to confront Matti's undoubtedly Fassbinder-like despair. 'I was numb for six months,' Matti recalled. 'I could hardly even get out of bed. I just lay there – devastated! I had lost my career and my lover. I felt finished. There was nothing to hold on to, little to look forward to. Just a flat, monochrome world, without colour, without hope . . .'

As if his words were being shaped by the images still flickering dully from Tim's television set, Matti stared at the screen. 'This is another of my films,' he said as we looked at a black-and-white video of a deserted railway station. 'It's Euston,' grunted Matti as if in answer to an unasked question as his video camera panned across the concrete floor and up towards the WH Smith and Casey Jones signs which blinked bleakly against the grey backdrop. A curious sound looped around the edges of the frame and, as it grew louder, Matti felt compelled to mumble again – 'Skaters . . .' And there the two boys came, in a deep-focus long-shot, roller-skating across the length of the furthest stretch of concourse. Their wheels resounded through the

empty station with a subterranean effect, making them sound like a train racing down a hillside tunnel. They looked ghostly in the distance, almost startlingly beautiful in that washed-out video light, and as they circled ever closer to his camera Matti began to murmur, 'Yes, yes, yes, look at them glide . . .'

Even Tim had been forgotten as Matti spoke to himself, watching his film reach its culmination with a close-up of one boy, who looked little more than fifteen years old, wearing a 'Red Devils' T-shirt and a matching Manchester United bobble-hat and scarf. He swept around and around, tightening his circle with every rotation. The closer he came to Matti's camera the deeper he seemed to sink his teeth into a Casey Jones burger, the ketchup shooting out one side of the bun as if it were a bloody special effect ordered by Matti. His last shot zoomed in on the dark stain made by the ketchup on the concrete floor.

Matti seemed lost in his film, as certain of its power as he was unconcerned by accusations of pretension from Tim. 'You see, this is why I am still alive today,' he said to me with black-eyed urgency. 'It's this camera, those boys, that's what I live for now. It's strange how I had to lose everything to see the beauty in a scene like the one I've just shown you. Before, I would have seen nothing except the possibility that this is the type of scenario you can use to sell jeans, fizzy drinks or chewing gum. You bung on an Otis Redding track or a Smiths ditty and you've got your ad. But I got kicked out the ad business, boy. I don't see stuff like that any more. Instead, I see ravaged beauty in these boys. I want them to be remembered, I want to share something with them, that strange moment as they came skating through a railway station at two in the morning, the one boy eating his hamburger. Recession blues mean nothing to me then. I feel weird then – loose, unshackled, man . . .'

Looking more unhinged than anything as he stared distractedly at the then blank television, Tim and I hesitated to interrupt Matti's reverie. Tim rolled his eyes in typically

Madonna-ish style as if to say: 'He gets this way sometimes.' But Matti didn't notice, proceeding instead to explain the contents from which he felt unshackled. 'I've been cut loose from everything that used to restrict me. I once thought I needed a high-powered job, a new car, a line of coke and a live-in lover to exist. If you had told me a few years ago that this is where I would end up, that this is what I would be doing, that these boys, these prostitutes, would be the subject of my every creative thought, I would have killed myself right there and then. Because then I was shackled, I was trapped. I tried to cover up my real self but it kept jutting out. Even then I would secretly live for the weekend where I could go to the Everyman or the Riverside to see some films or pick up some boy from 'Pumps' for a quick cruise. *That was* what I was most interested in – images from movies and of prostitutes. And now, without the worry of pleasing some corporate client or of understanding the moods of some emotional lover, I go to places like that, to Euston, to film. I'm filming for them, to remember them, and I'm filming for me, I'm filming for company . . .'

While Matti appeared to be making an eerily neat link-up with Docherty's photographing 'for memory', I was struck most by the choice of those final words. 'Filming for company?' I asked tentatively.

'I thought you'd recognize the analogy,' Matti replied with soft satisfaction.

'You're thinking of *Killing For Company*?' I said as calmly as I could while feeling an inward tremor shudder through me. I thought of the book, with that title, which Brian Masters had written about Dennis Nilsen. 'Killing For Company' had been a phrase attributed to the ferociously intelligent Nilsen when he was asked to explain his motivation for murdering fifteen young men, some of them prostitutes, in the early 1980s. The case, and that phrase, stayed in the grimmest reaches of the imagination because of the variety of ways in which Nilsen disposed of his victims' bodies – most grotesquely by cutting them up,

boiling their heads on top of his stove and then flushing the remnants of those different body parts down his toilet. The fact that the bodies were often kept for months on end in the rooms he rented in suburban homes in first Cricklewood and then Muswell Hill only deepened the public's fascinated horror with Dennis Nilsen.

'That's right – "Killing For Company". The Nilsen quote.'

Tim, dressed as Madonna, rolled a joint on the bed alongside me. Whether or not the task required his full concentration he had stopped tilting his eyes into the back of his head which reassured me that he, at least, did not regard Matti as a potential copy-cat killer. Noticing that the toilet door was conveniently closed, I felt sufficiently cool to ask, 'Are you interested in Dennis Nilsen?'

'Who isn't?' Matti responded cheerfully.

'What interests you most about him?'

'Well, he might also have been interested in making short films but ultimately, he's the antithesis to me!'

The relief must have seeped visibly from me, for Matti suddenly unleashed a staccato burst of giggles. 'Christ, I don't believe it! You had me down as Nilsen Mark II, didn't you? No way, boy!'

'What sort of films did Nilsen make?'

'I've seen just snatches of some of the home-movies he made. He's really intense in them – shouting "cut, cut" like a real pro and telling this blond boy to use the camera to "pan" across his body. That was his first boyfriend, "Twinkle". Can you believe it? Dennis Nilsen, soon to be a mass-murderer, called his boyfriend "Twinkle"! Even though we ended up in opposite places – with him having killed all those boy prostitutes and me trying to save them for posterity, if you like, on film – I'm still interested in those "Twinkle" kind of twists. He was also a very good writer, Nilsen; an insightful writer. He called himself the "Monochrome Man" and I thought that that was a brilliant way of also describing the tint of the world he

invaded. It's not for nothing that I choose to shoot my station boys in black and white because, even in real colour, that world looks drained of everything. There only seems to be a flat, dull sheen of black and white. That's what those boys' lives are like. Black or white. Live or die. Prostitute or starve. They're at the very bottom of the prostitution pile. They're selling their butts for a Casey Jones burger and a cigarette. They're slabs of meat, lining the station toilets, and Nilsen was the butcher of our worst nightmares.

'But Nilsen also understood that awful loneliness you find in the most promiscuous places. There was this other quote he wrote – sex was easy, it could be as cheap as a forged signature but a relationship, he said, should be more like a beautifully written letter, something you've worked at, something you've crafted. And that's what Nilsen wanted before he turned to killing – a relationship to end the loneliness. And when his psychosis tore him apart he went looking for the loneliest boys. There's this line he wrote about one of his victims – "Think over the lonely life of you, it is tomorrow soon enough and they will meddle in our business." '

I wondered if there was not a danger in over-emphasizing Nilsen's poetic hindsight, blinking in surprise at the eloquence he could summon. But then I also remembered the convoluted candour Nilsen sometimes used to counterbalance his verse. As I ascertained later, on a sketch Nilsen had drawn of one of his victims he wrote, 'Peaceful, pale flesh on a bed/Real and beautiful – and dead'; on the back of the sheet he had also written, 'I stood in great grief and aware of utter sadness as if someone very dear to me had just died . . . I sometimes wondered if anyone cared for me or them. That could surely be me lying there. In fact a lot of the time it was.'

'That's what I'm trying to stress most,' Matti urged, 'the utter desolation, the deep loneliness of those boys he killed. He shared that with them, this "Monochrome Man". You

can see that that was what he believed. So you had him keeping those bodies in the flat with him for months on end . . .'

'*Killing For Company*?'

'Exactly!'

Tim's horrified tut-tutting forced me to break this macabre imagining. 'Matti,' I said, 'this interest in Nilsen can seem unhealthy . . .'

'It's not the interest which is unhealthy,' he responded sharply, 'but the fact that these boys, fifteen of them, could have been killed over four years and no-one even noticed they were missing. We still don't even know the names of eight of them. It's a scandalously unhealthy society which can allow some of its people to be literally flushed down the toilet. Those boys he killed – and these boys I film – are trash to the rest of society. They're the forgotten boys and it's that which obsesses me about the Nilsen case. Not the intricacies of his murder technique, but the fact that his victims vanished one after another, unnoticed . . .'

'Most people, I guess, just shy away from thinking about Nilsen in anything beyond "Monster Goes Mad" terms.'

'It's too easy to say, "Nilsen repulses me. He horrifies me. I can't bear to even think about what he did." But we have a duty to face the horror . . .'

'A duty to whom?'

'To those he killed and to those boys I film. The boys you saw skating on my film share the same hopelessly lost and homeless circumstances as most of Nilsen's victims. When they get picked up by a man it might be another Dennis Nilsen for all they know . . .'

With the joint then wedged safely in his mouth as he began painting his toe-nails a bizarre combination of pink and black in preparation for his next client, 'Madonna' looked up suddenly in alarm: 'Fuck, how many of the nutters are there?'

'There, there,' Matti cooed comfortingly, 'I was just making a point – it's only words, Timmy . . .'

'But it's a frightening point,' I said, despite 'Madonna's' increasing discomfort. 'Maybe there aren't any other Dennis Nilsens, but there are other men ready to batter boy prostitutes because they're the easiest prey; because, as you said, as homeless people they can go missing without anyone noticing.'

Matti looked quietly out of the window, not wanting to further fuel 'Madonna's' fear. But, as the silence thickened, he eventually blurted out, 'Don't worry, Timmy, I'm just saying that there's no big monster for you to fear. It's more a social kind of problem amongst the destitute, the homeless. If you went away, you'd be missed by me at once. You're not one of them. You're luckier than those forgotten Euston and Piccadilly Circus boys. It's all down to circumstances in the end. Same thing with Nilsen – maybe he would have turned out different if he'd had a father around. Same thing with Fassbinder – maybe he would have been OK if his relationship with his mother hadn't been so twisted. It's like if the circumstances had been different in this room, maybe you would've been the writer and he would have been the transvestite . . .'

That possibility sent gales of guffaws cascading through Marylebone's own 'Madonna'. 'Oooo, you fucker, you're making my make-up run,' he finally giggled as tears of laughter ran down his face. 'Hunky? A transvestite – *never*!'

Uncertain whether to accept this as an obscure compliment to my macho strut or as an insult to my hidden Madonna-like charms, I merely smiled weakly. The laughter rocked on until 'Madonna' at last shooed us out of his flat. 'Out, you two, go and play with Matti's video-camera. I'm busy now. I've got a client coming in ten minutes. He's dead boring but at least I know he's safe. You can't get safer than a civil servant, can you?'

Matti and I looked queasily at each other as the black irony passed over 'Madonna's' oblivious blonde wig. He, plainly, did not remember that Dennis Nilsen had been a

civil servant up until the day of his arrest in February 1983, virtually nine years ago to that very day. We left the flat without reminding him, trusting this to be just a grisly coincidence and that Tim would be safe when we next returned to Marylebone.

Matti and I sat in a pub in Soho, talking about Lee Docherty. I was preoccupied with the idea that both men felt compelled to document prostitution, to create a visual record of its most disadvantaged practitioners. The difference in their methods began with the cameras they used. In choosing to photograph 'his' prostitutes, Docherty was concerned with the freezing of time, with capturing a moment forever; Matti was more intrigued by the way his videos could both distend and extend time, so that he could watch his boys skating in fast-forward or slow-motion on his screen. But, more cryptically, there was another distinction in the way they 'remembered' the prostitution they saw around them. It had less to do with the obvious fact that Matti was involved in gay, rather than Docherty's straight, prostitution. More significantly, unlike the working Docherty, Matti was a client. That appeared to underpin Matti's romantic emphasis of the rent boys' 'beauty' as compared to the excruciatingly hard street life which Docherty stressed whenever he spoke of the prostitutes he photographed. The prostitute, more than the client, saw resilience before radiance.

Despite these contradictions, there was also much to unify them – not least their seeming fixation with films and with death. Docherty was no less haunted by his sister's suicide than when he had first told me of her death; Matti by the insidious memory of rent-boy murder which, presumably, encouraged him to point out that we were in one of Nilsen's favourite pubs, where he had picked up at least one of his victims.

Alongside us there were only a few stragglers and dedicated drinkers whiling away their time on that drab

winter afternoon. Perhaps my previous exposure to Matti's movies had worn me down for everywhere I looked I saw his monochrome world. The grey seemed to sink into our skin. My weariness must have emerged for Matti said, 'But that's not why I suggest we come here. It's just a pretty central location and some of my video rent-boys drink here. You know, Spike and Nick, the two at Euston, they sometimes drop by here.'

'Would they be looking for business here?'

'No, not specifically. Maybe they'll get picked up but mostly they come here to get out of the rain, to have a drink or two. But they get booted out often enough too when the barman spots that they're underage. They go quiet as mice then. They leave without a murmur. They know they have to – they're sweet boys, really . . .'

'Would you call yourself a client of theirs?'

'Yes, I guess I'd have to . . .'

'So you don't just make movies of them?'

'More and more I do. But when I first met them I was just looking for sex. Part of the reason I went down to Euston in the beginning had much to do with economics actually. When I was made redundant I got a bit of a "brass handshake". Not bad maybe, but certainly not "golden" either. I've invested that redundancy money as best as I could but I've had to completely change my lifestyle. I'm very frugal now. I still do freelance work but it's a bit spasmodic. So, early on, I cut back on the luxuries. One of the first things to go was paying out money at "Pumps". I just couldn't afford to pay £100 if I felt like something different.'

'Why did you start paying for sex in the first place?'

'Because I just got sick of cruising. People say there's a blankness to prostitution but at least you confront it, you know what you're dealing with. The blankness that comes with cruising and with promiscuity is more insidious. I just preferred to deal with a prostitute. He gave me what I wanted, I paid him. As it happens, I first went down to the

stations on a bit of a cruise. Then I saw a couple of rent-boys and I liked them and I was happy to pay them – they needed the money more than I did. And compared to "Pumps" they were dirt cheap. And that's when I became interested in them. I felt there was something poignant in the fact that some of them were still so beautiful even though they were selling themselves so cheap. I saw that straight off and I think I wanted to treasure it, to preserve it. I started to film them then. Because that's what I do – I wouldn't say I'm a film-maker yet, but I do know how to use a camera . . .'

'What other films have you made with the rent-boys?'

'I don't make any kind of sex-films, if that's what you're asking. I always film them in the places they work. OK, I do have sex with them sometimes. But that's completely separate from the films. I pay them for sex – double what they're used to getting – and I take them home and I tell them to have a bath and I feed them. I'm really not into "toilet sex" myself. I think Nilsen put an end to that for me . . .'

Whatever the dryness of Matti's irony, there was still something awkwardly defensive about his answers. An undercurrent of guilt seemed to run through him whenever he spoke about his interaction as a client of the station prostitutes.

'Yes, I suppose I am guilty in a way. I wish I could offer them a home, these boys. I wish I could take them away from the despair of their lives. They sleep rough and it gets bitterly cold out there. But I had to sell my flat when I lost my job. I live in rented accommodation now. My home is not my own. I'm forty-seven years old and I'm back to the indignity of having to be answerable to a landlord. So if I bring a rent-boy home with me I can only do so for a limited time. And when a person has lived out on the streets there's sometimes a wildness in them. That's why they can't get a job at any agency like "Pumps". They're too raw for those kinds of punters. Putting it mildly, these young boys

can be very excitable. They once kicked up a terrible racket when they were over at my place. I had to go out to do an afternoon shoot and when I came back they had literally trashed the place. They were just having a laugh – but the landlord didn't see it like that. So, unfortunately, I have to be a bit more circumspect these days – which also means I can't really offer a place of refuge from the street.'

'And what about your films – are they of any help to the rent-boys?'

'I'd be lying if I said the films helped them more than they do me. I'm interested in film. I care about the boys. I try to bring those strands together. I've often thought about making a formal television documentary of rent-boy prostitution. If their stories were shown to millions it might help. But if I were to make such a documentary then I would want to do it my way. I would want to have direct personal input. I would want to reveal my interaction with these boys because that's the strength of this story, how we, me and them, representing two different strata in society, have been brought together. I'm their client and, on film, I'm also their director. But the TV channels would have the tabloids crawling all over them. "Underage gay sex filth!" – you can imagine the headlines. So for now our films are private – you're the only audience we've shown them to. The boys don't mind that – they know I'm not in this to exploit them. In fact they've come to like the attention. If anything, I help them in that I give them a sense of worth by filming them. They're not trash to me – and when they watch the films they see that too. They see their own beauty. It's like the Madonna collage I made for Tim – it was a tribute to him. It was a sign to respect for him that I made that. He knows that and it's good he does. The same goes with the rent-boys. You come see me filming them one day, they look like they have some freedom then . . .'

They came skating through the freezing fog. The first boy, with his baseball cap skewered back-to-front on his sixteen-

year-old head, rode a long black-and-white board. On its widest part, in the space between his two flattened feet, he had painted a red devil. He came careering down the short hill, with the four rubber wheels rollicking across the cracks and bumps in the concrete. He made a low, grunting noise, like he was struggling to draw in breath through the cold.

But he was just fooling around, pretending that he was about to crash through a brick wall or to fly Evil Kinevilishly across some imaginary canyon in Euston. Instead, he ripped up the ramp that they had made an hour before out of dustbins, planks and broken bricks. At the top of the wooden slope he quietened for a moment in concentration. Then he hit air and he was down, thudding into the ground. He picked up that rhythmic grunt again as he wheelied to a halt.

That sound seemed to help him push his way back up the hill again, but it was also made in echoing tandem with his friend, the second boy, who was then about ten feet from the ramp. His head was bare and he was a little older, eighteen at the most. He was roller-skating rather than skateboarding and the wheels he swept down on made an almost whispering sound. And then he was up and over too, screaming wildly in the air where the first boy, looking back at him over his shoulder from a short distance up the hill, had been so speedily detached.

Matti filmed them all the time, even following them to the top of the rise where they disappeared into the fog. But he knew how to film in light like this, unearthly as it was, and as the first boy started to roll down again Matti crouched so that his camera tilted upwards. His knees creaked with the effort but that discomfort was nothing compared to the thrill he'd feel when he watched the video on his television later that night. Matti was able to imagine how that extreme camera angle would look on screen. The boys, Spike and Nick, would zoom almost vertically down at him at first, blurring shapelessly in the fog. Then, as they

reached the halfway point, he'd straighten himself as they plunged through the thinner mist and into clearer view. By then the video was recording the sounds that they and their boards made instead of just his own chunky breathing. The camera would level itself, his one open eye looking straight into the boys' faces as they closed in on the ramp. Then he'd inadvertently step back as he slanted the camera upwards to catch them in mid-air.

On tape he could stretch and, like Docherty, even freeze that moment. In slow-motion he'd watch them climb the ramp, their eyes and mouths opened wide, gleaming in the greyness. When they were at that point, when they were flying, their faces shone with some kind of freedom. The screen seemed unnaturally silent then. He often wondered how you could slow down sound, like he did with those pictures, without it collapsing into distortion. And the stillness surrounding his frozen image told him what he knew the teenage faces of those boys would also show him as soon as they were set moving again. As they laughingly struck ground, it was as if they were proving something to him – that even when they were skating on a Saturday afternoon they knew, as well as anyone could know, there was no meaning to that word he sometimes used – 'freedom'.

'How long have you two boys worked here?' I asked Spike and Nick as they sucked at the chocolate milkshakes I'd just bought for them at their favourite Casey Jones hangout.

'Nine months for me – two for him,' sniffed Spike, the older boy. 'Before that I started at Piccadilly Circus. I worked there, around the toilets and pubs. But I moved on here – less trouble with the police. That's where I met this little prick,' he said, gesturing dismissively towards Nick who responded by blowing the last of his shake through a straw at Spike. After the ritual swearing match between them he went on to explain that 'Nicky didn't know where the fucking hell he was. Lost in the middle of next week he was.

Either getting bounced by some creepy punter or nicked by the police. He was fucking green, man!'

'But I could run faster than the lot of them. They couldn't catch me or nothing!' Nick responded.

'What were you doing in Piccadilly Circus anyway?' I asked this Dickensian-type urchin, thinking that he was more like Alistair's 'dirty-faced little pixie' than Jackie had ever been.

'I'd run away, mate.'

'Why?'

' 'Cos I hated fucking Rochdale. It's a dump.'

'That's why you cry at night that you miss it, then?' Spike sneered.

'I don't miss it, cunt!'

'What he don't miss,' Spike said to me with a conspiratorial wink, 'is the beatings his old man used to give him. That's why there's a bond between us. I know what that feeling's like. That's why I left Manchester too . . .'

'All I miss is Old Trafford,' sighed Nick. 'Fuck, what a year to miss – the year we might win the title at last. That must crease you up, you Arsenal cunt! Gives you pain, hey?'

Looking into this grubby boy's face suddenly shining with ardour I let his cruel jibe ride and tapped my fingers patiently on the plastic-topped table as the two of them lurched into an embarrassing 'Hand it over, hand it over, hand it over, Arsenal!' ditty which took a while to interrupt.

'Wouldn't it be worth going home for a short time then – even if it's just 'cos of United?'

'Naaah! We're better off down here!' said Spike.

'But you're homeless here!'

'We've got each other!' Spike asserted again.

'And our skates – we live on wheels, baby!' chipped in Nick.

'So how do you live when you're not on wheels?'

'We sell butt, kid! That's what we do – we're rent-boys and proud of it ain't we, Nicky?'

'I guess,' Nick said.

'What are the men like?'

'Married!' the boys crooned in perfect harmony.

'Doesn't that seem odd to you?'

'Yeah – but that's life, innit? They want their cake an' all that, those guys. They've got their wives and kids but they come down in their suits looking for some hot-rodding with us. An' if they pay, we give it to 'em.'

'Matti's different though,' murmured Nick.

'Yeah, Matti's great. I think he wants to turn us into movie stars!'

'Quite excellent dude! *Spike An' Nick's Bogus Adventure!*'

'Yo dude, hit it!' Spike and Nick played heavy metal air guitar licks to each other, exchanged high fives and shouted out 'Yo dude!' once more. For those few moments they were a world away, playing the parts of Keanu Reeves and 'the other one, the dude whose name we can never remember', as if they were stars on a Hollywood set rather than rent-boys in Euston. But, if nothing else, Matti's two boys were rooted in reality. Not long after their 'Bogus Adventure' charade was through they sidled from their seats with a 'Got to earn some food, man, got to sell some butt, kid' goodbye as they spotted a couple of prospective clients, briefcase-wielding businessmen in anoraks, lurking furtively around the men's public toilet.

'I'll take the one on the right. . .' Spike said softly.

'Excellent, dude!' I heard Nick reply, as they sauntered casually, already professionally, across the concourse, knowing that after one more job each they could call it quits for the night. Then they would at last be able to hit their wheels, skate on out of there and down towards that place beneath the Arches where they slept most winter nights.

Chapter Sixteen

Decriminalizing the Angels of Love

On a March night cold enough to remind us that winter was not yet through, Matti McLean marvelled at the warm colour of *Querelle*. The entire film is shot through with a reddish glow perforated with patches of golden yellow, so that it appears as if there is no time before or beyond sunset. When he finally switched that tape in the VCR for one of his own videos of Spike and Nick, I was struck by the extreme strangeness of the change. From the luminous to the monochrome, Matti had also moved from the movies to the station, from Fassbinder to Nilsen.

He made much of the fact that the director and the murderer had died and been sentenced for life within the frame of a single year, once again forcing me to recognize the curious way in which Matti forged his identity as a consumer of prostitution. Inspired by Fassbinder and repelled by Nilsen, he strove to elevate his role as a rent-boy client to a more aesthetic, if socially rigorous, realm. In making Spike and Nick look sparsely beautiful, he tried to enshrine their 'butt-selling' struggle forever. This also meant that he, Matti, was different from the other middle-aged men picking up boys a third of their age outside the railway toilets.

As he watched that Saturday afternoon video of the two boys skating up their homeless ramp I thought of them in the streets outside, a long way from Matti's Twickenham flat. Hunched on their boards and skates against the teeth

of the wind, I imagined them still faking parts in *Bill & Ted's Bogus Adventure* as their chosen method of reinventing themselves. If they had been with us instead, they would have insisted on returning to the 'excellent' scene in *Querelle* where Brad Davis is buggered by a burly black barman. Matti said they cackled and slapped open palms whenever they saw that spectacle, not only because they found the rest of the film to be so dull but also because they recognized their own rent-boy identity in those few moments of celluloid.

But Brad Davis, in real life, was dead. My thoughts turned across town to Mandy Kavanagh whose own prostitution had reached its last few weeks. Death, encoded in 'The Terminator Angel's' name, had always been an implied backdrop in her bondage basement, in her work as a divine seller of ultimate retribution. I had begun to worry that her own thoughts might be increasingly shaped by some hazy spectre of death; for, after junkiedom and prostitution, what other barrier of identity could she hurdle apart from her own death? In both poetic and rocking terms, as ordained by her youthful icons of Rimbaud and Iggy Pop, only death could conceivably top the mythic romance of drugs and sex.

The alternative appeared to be an extension of her identity as a prostitute, a renewed challenge to test her 'resolve', for it was difficult to imagine 'The Terminator Angel' transforming herself into a carefree woman of leisure. Yet with the end of that specific 'five-year experiment' in stark sight, cracks had already emerged around the edges of her cherished concept of control. Questions such as 'What do I do next?' and 'Where do I go from here?' slipped into her conversation with alarming regularity during the last weeks of work. The personal simplicity of her original plan had been overshadowed by the raging intensity of her struggle with Alistair, a struggle which appeared to personify the wider conflicts at the centre of more public prostitution.

In essence, Mandy had been politicized by prostitution. Interaction with clients and with prostitutes as diverse as

Alice and Jackie had lent a harder edge to her previous self-absorption. On her more fiery days, the tenuous 'romance of death' was scorched by her concern for those women working in Soho and the telephone-booth rooms. Judicial prejudice against street prostitutes irked her even more than the boundless sexism she had encountered in her former modelling career. Prostitution, she had come to believe, exemplified the hotbed of strife inflicted upon women.

However, the clash between Alistair and Jackie in Chinatown had sapped her own equilibrium. Mandy had been troubled before by his barely restrained sadism, by stories such as his fantasized rape of a teenage girl, and she had to accept that her domination of him only lasted for an hour every week. The rest of the time belonged to Alistair and his proclaimed 'mastery' over women.

That authority had also begun to show distinct signs of splintering. Alistair faced the uncertain prospect of a future devoid of 'The Terminator Angel' with even more trepidation than Mandy. For the preceding five years his identity had been bound up in their Tuesday afternoon sessions – the swagger he carried the rest of the week seemed to depend on the guilt-draining release he found beneath her riveted belt.

Ironically, he considered his identity as a coercive financier to be threatened more immediately from a different quarter. Separated in his mind from what he described as 'the seductive wiles and baleful tantrums of women', I supposedly represented a more direct danger to Alistair and his high-flying vocation. In the weeks I had spent in the company of 'Madonna' and Matti, he orchestrated a series of minor skinhead skirmishes, during the course of which punches and snot-snorted phlegm brushed my head at steady, ten-day intervals. They were always accompanied by allusions to 'the man'. They had been sent by 'the man' to teach me a lesson once and for all; 'the man' was taking a sharp interest in the personalization of this *Nothing Personal* caper.

The repetitive strain of those attacks took its toll, mostly because I felt uncertain how best to deal with their sombre intent. Laying a legitimate charge of assault would shred the anonymity of others and open the way for a messy tabloid and legal battle between Alistair and me. That personal clash between defamed financier and frayed writer lay beyond the more pressing issues enveloping prostitution. Moreover, I knew that the direct witnesses to his violence, apart from myself, were prostitutes and I was wary of exposing them to unnecessary legal scrutiny.

Yet, even though he rightly guessed my reluctance to press home damaging accusations of GBH, Alistair's professional identity was breaking up beneath his fear of being specifically named in these pages. The risk he took in hiring 'frighteners' to work on me must have added an unbearable weight to his increasing desperation.

A few months before, prior to Alistair's intensified determination to prevent publication, I had felt more sure of myself. There had even been a touch of indulgence in describing the severe psychological torture entailed in the task of sitting alone in a room on a Saturday night, trying to think of an alternative description for 'blow-job' – surely *that* was a pubic hair-tearing experience worthy of any diligent writer?

However, those pleasurable exaggerations of ego had to go by the board when I found myself being rattled by Alistair's campaign of more concentrated psychological warfare. One windy Sunday morning in February, thinking that I had sent a series of banal oral sex clichés packing during the previous night's writing, I ventured out for a newspaper. I opened my front door but stopped in mid-stride for there, standing in grim silence, were five men. Their arms were folded over their black tracksuits and their heads were covered by balaclavas of the same colour. Even their eyes seemed to glitter blackly through the stretched wool. They stared back at me, their very repose reducing me to hapless immobility.

When I eventually slammed the door shut and ran to the phone I had to concede the brilliance of their switch in strategy. Another familiar physical blitz then would have been troublesome, but not nearly as devastating as that singular encounter. For the balaclava-boys had penetrated my writer's notional 'life of the mind' and left a thesaurus of shadowy threats rather than words. I knew then that a mere book could never match the depth of Alistair's rage.

I felt then that this book's publication no longer mattered when set against the prevailing brutality of prostitution. It appeared that I had concentrated, rather than reduced, the severity of discord between two of prostitution's most formidable protagonists. Elsewhere, whether in the 'one-woman fucking rooms', in the railway stations or out on the streets, the assaults and degradation continued without even a glimpse of any change in the law or public attitude towards prostitution.

I came close that day to erasing everything I had written. My words appeared to sharpen the real meaning of 'breathless' – they looked, first, tired and, then, dead on the page. What hope could they offer to any prostitute? If someone on the fringes of their dark world could be so effectively hounded and intimidated, what chance did they have of reversing the forbidding odds set against their pain? How much more hollow could my own pretensions to a 'writer's identity' appear when compared with the legal inability of prostitutes to forge legitimate, self-respecting identities of their own?

But, as she had done once before, Leila inadvertently came to my rescue that afternoon. She called me, after I had not heard from her for weeks, to say that she had been on the run from 'Tyson' during all that time. He had finally caught up with her a few days before, had beaten her badly, but had still failed to drag her back to the street corner he controlled. 'I whipped his mind, man,' she laughed despite the hurt it caused to the side of her face which she said was swollen and blue. 'He thought that once he caught up with

me it was all over. He'd thought I'd just cave in. But he didn't know that there had been a change in me. When he saw me lying there bleeding, still shaking my head saying no, his mind exploded! He said I was crazy. I was an evil bitch. That he couldn't work with a cunt like me. I knew then that I'd whipped him. When they call you "bitch" instead of "baby" you've got 'em. He gave up. He left me. Just walked away, shaking his head, holding the hand where I'd bitten him. I beat him, man!'

She then asked me, as sweet as ever, how I felt, if I was still writing her 'def' story of how she'd 'chilled' 'Tyson'? Compared with her lone struggle to carve out a life beyond seemingly inexorable forces, I had the backing of countless people in less desperate circumstances. My morose agonizing peeled away in deference to her endurance. And so I continued writing and never again considered abandoning the stories that had been shared so intimately with me by so many people. Even when they left my mind for a physical attack on my body again, I felt equipped to deal with Alistair's gang.

Not many weeks after the black balaclavas had slid silently from view, in the last days of my writing, they proved once more that I had penetrated a previously obscured world of psychotic men and abused women. Feeling personally cocky again, having just completed the penultimate chapter, I stepped out casually into the night in search of a chocolatey reward.

Those thoughts cracked with the thud of flat wood against the back of my neck. I fell to the ground and then they were on me, their boots kicking out ferociously. They kicked me for a long time, for thirty seconds or more, gradually settling into a methodical rhythm which allowed the five of them to take it in turns to sink their boots into my kidneys and the small of my back. After the first head-opening moments of terrible shock, a physical numbness set in. I did not feel much pain then as the kicking continued, my mind moving on to a more bizarre collection of dizzying images. I heard

a woman scream and run on high heels down the road calling out a word that sounded like 'hope, hope' but must really have been 'help'. I had time to wonder if she was someone I knew, if she was a prostitute who understood the way time slowed down to an almost dream-like pace when you were being attacked. Even more strangely, I thought of Colin Dugmore and of John Hudspith bleeding on Hampstead Heath as he goaded his kicking assailants' masculinity before they reached a pitch of such fury that they eventually left him for dead. It was not that I feared such a fate myself but rather that the seconds passed so slowly and these images so intensely that it was this book, rather than my own life, which glimmered before me. I even had time to flick through the irony of the fact that, after all my detachment from the uniformed masks and sado-masochistic rituals of prostitution, I had been reduced to ground level by these balaclavas and boots.

'You're dead now, you're finished,' said one of the five when they stopped. They stood around me for a short while, allowing me to judge which pair of black boots shone brightest under the yellow street-light. As if deciding that their heavy breathing and my stillness were testimony to a job well done, they stepped over me and, at last, picked up their pace as they began to run down the street towards the Portobello Road where there were enough dark places in which to split up and disappear over walls and into parked cars. My mind also switched speeds then, grinding to a halt. I remembered being helped up by two teenage boys and saying that I was 'all right', that a friend inside would take me to hospital.

I am not sure why I said that, except for the need to be alone while the daze lasted so I could still imagine being lost in a dream. Inside, it turned out, I was not alone after all. As I lay on my side, I watched a small spider crawling along the skirting board. Where it would normally have been considered as a horrifying constituent of my own personal hell, that particular spider helped spin out the dream-time.

I watched it scurry and then saunter with abstracted interest, grateful even for the shift in focus it provided. I watched that spider most of the night, only falling asleep after I heard the birds singing in the playground down the road.

Then, abruptly, I felt it was essential for me to get to hospital. I climbed out of bed and pulled my left sock on, only to find that the spider was already inside. The need for me to find help was so oppressive, however, that I tried to ignore its hairy body wrapping itself around my toes. I pulled on my other sock, only to find that a second spider had made its home there. I imagined that if I stepped into my shoes they'd die and I would be able to make it to the hospital. But as I walked along a street full of crying women and whip-wielding businessmen I saw and felt my own feet being eaten alive by two rapidly growing, monstrous spiders. Their black legs shot out at all angles, grabbing hold of my legs, making it impossible to walk and, all the while, they were tearing the flesh from my feet until they were nothing but bloodied stumps.

The pain was terrible and it was that which woke me from my nightmare, a bad trip of a Jungian dream which returned to haunt me the next two nights as I found myself passing searing, blood-lined urine. I did make it to the hospital, without seeing my spidery friends again, and it was from there that I called Mandy. She came to see me but my attempt at a witty evocation of the Spider-Man transformation only seemed to sharpen her distress.

Before the day was through she had called Alistair at his office, convinced that he had wanted to kill me. He was thrown by her anger and cried down the telephone line, begging her not to go to the newspapers with the story of his vendetta against me. It had all been a terrible mistake, he sobbed. It had never been his intention to allow the situation to reach that point of seriousness. He knew that he needed help, that his violence against me was merely the trigger squeezing a much larger crisis. He would tell his wife the truth of his Tuesday afternoon appointments, he would

go into psychoanalysis, he would ensure that I was never harmed again. He would do all of this and more, he begged, if she refrained from exposing him publicly and gave him a chance to find the therapy he needed. She had been the one, he said with attempted composure, who had driven him to the edge by ending their 'tryst' so suddenly.

She replied that five years was not a framework which deserved a 'sudden' description. He had known all along that she was going to stick to her word and that when she hit the five-year mark her prostitution would be over. She had given him plenty of time to prepare for that imminent day.

She ended their conversation then, with Alistair uncertain if she was about to carry out her threat as promised. At that moment Mandy herself remained ambivalent, her desire to make Alistair pay for his intimidation counterbalanced by the knowledge that she and all the other women he had visited would be forced to account for their prostitution in a court which had not always proved itself equitable when judging the lives of 'whores'. Mandy knew that she would be a key witness and wondered how her family, even though she had distanced herself so far from them, would react to the news that she had been a prostitute for the last five years.

Mandy also thought then of her new friend Rachel Hathaway, whom she had been introduced to by Alice a few months previously. Mandy and Alice had long felt that prostitution instilled a restraining influence on men as damaged, yet powerful, as Alistair. The tortuous question regarding the fate of Alistair and, much more urgently, that of other women once he became unchecked by 'The Terminator Angel' had troubled both Mandy and Alice. It was then that Rachel's name was suggested as a potential substitute. Alice had met her in her earliest escorting days and stressed that she was the most resilient and sensible woman she had worked with as a prostitute. Rachel had dominated hard men all her working life and yet she had

done so with a deft imagination which emphasized the more playful elements of S&M over its bleaker scenarios.

Rachel, Alice insisted, was the one prostitute who would not only be able to control Alistair but to also deflate his more mythic masochistic desires. And so Rachel Hathaway agreed to play a new part, as 'The Violator Angel' to Alistair, once her 'Terminator' counterpart withdrew into a different world, beyond prostitution. Alistair had agreed, with an uncertain mixture of reluctance and interest, to visit Rachel during the last weeks of Mandy's work in her 'house of pain'. He did little but talk to Rachel, surprising the rest of us who knew him as a more active consumer of punishment. After two meetings she concluded that he was on the verge of some kind of breakdown as he planned his various strategies against this book.

My fear that he would return to Soho and attack another prostitute like Jackie was dismissed by both Alice and Rachel. They concurred that Alistair's fear and self-loathing had escalated to its most fevered pitch during his campaign of violence against myself. There was little chance of him returning to what they described as 'a rare blip' in his submissive desire to be flagellated by prostitutes. The fact that he had toned down his fantasy talk against women during his later sessions with Mandy confirmed her own feeling that Alice and Rachel were right in arguing that his violence was directed against me, rather than any prostitute. That twist had as much to do with the fact that I was a 'dissenting' male, a more deadly threat to him than a seductive woman.

Mandy's own uncertainties about Alistair's state of mind had been soothed by Rachel's cool strength when dealing with him. Yet she could not believe that those attributes deserved to be tested even more thoroughly in court if Alistair brought forth the 'sharply-fanged' legal team he had so often described. Rachel had a beautiful green-eyed, seven-year-old daughter and Mandy knew how other people would judge her. They would call Rachel an unfit mother because

she still worked as a part-time prostitute. Yet Mandy remembered her own family, her mother and sister and her brothers' wives – they were 'society' people, envied and admired by many, but none of the mothers in Mandy's family could match Rachel when it came to showing love and care for her daughter. If she exposed the truth of Alistair's real identity in order to stop the violence against me she knew that he would lash out. She understood that if he went under he would name all of them – and where, then, would Rachel's daughter be left but in council care? Her mother would be punished because she was a prostitute. Ultimately, Mandy reflected, it was preferable if I could withstand the threat of Alistair's frenzy without further involving the prostitutes. The focus of his onslaught, we decided, should remain in that narrow band, tightening around me, marked 'personal'.

Significantly, when Alistair called me the following afternoon I knew that he had finally submitted. The severity of that last attack had mostly debilitated his own spirit. Although he was careful not to admit his involvement directly, he said wearily to me that he was 'concerned to hear about the rough time' I had just been through. Although we had only met on a couple of occasions he wanted me to know that he recognized my 'ethical standards'. At that point I was ready to vomit down the mouthpiece but he stumbled on to his next point – that if there was any way in which he could help me I should call upon his assistance. He felt certain that a 'horrendous mistake' had been made and that I had 'suffered needlessly'. He offered me his heartfelt sympathy and wished me well. I was speechless for most of his blustering conversation and only managed a curt emphasis, just before he hung up on me with an audible sob, that I wanted the attacks to stop.

My trio of confidantes – Mandy, Alice and Rachel, all of them much more experienced dealers with damaged men than I – took great heart from the news of that call. In their judgment, Alistair was at last showing some vestiges

of sense. Although he took a significant risk in contacting me directly, thus confirming our previous meetings, they also considered it to be his way of letting me know that his declared 'season of violence' was over. His earlier wish to 'break me' had evidently crumbled, for he himself had long been a broken man. And yet, still wary of his obsession with brutality, Mandy resolved that for the sake of those future prostitutes who might not be as lucky as she and I had been, she would force him to confront the man he had become. She had one card left to play on that fateful March day when he visited 'The Terminator Angel' in her bondage basement for the final time.

Amid the flurry of turmoil engulfing my writing and the fragmentation of Mandy's 'Terminator Angel' persona, a coincidence which was thick with both sharp irony and shared poignancy, there were moments of rare illumination. I had not seen Simone Maillard for many months, the nature of this book being that I moved from one 'sex-zone' to another once I felt I had gathered some insight into a particular grid of prostitution. However, she had often been in my thoughts, especially during the time of my interviews with Alistair and Colin Dugmore and my troubled contemplation of the 'Spanner' case.

The problematic issues raised by that Old Bailey judgment had resurfaced in early February when the eight men given custodial sentences of up to four-and-a-half years for their involvement in the S&M ring had their appeals heard by Lord Lane. The preceding fourteen months had reduced most of the men, who were released from prison on bail pending the Appeal Court's decision, to states of ruin and often heavy sedation. It was clear that this unprecedented case would run for many more months, even years, as the 'Spanner's' defence team were determined to take the case to the House of Lords and even the European Court of Human Rights if Lord Lane upheld the convictions. A key element in the case against the prosecution was the renewed

certainty that the men were being prosecuted for their homosexuality as much as under the more official Offences Against The Person Act of 1861.

Howard Lambert, whose own business was continuing to progress steadily despite the recession, pointed out the discrepancy between judicial responses to hetero and homosexual sado-masochism. 'Look, kid,' he said to me one night, 'you have this "Spanner" case which gets your and my goolies in a twist. But it opens up the acute homophobia we've always seen in Britain. In 1988 there was this crazie, right, a male heterosexual nutter who went round inflicting brutal S&M attacks against women. His guilt was clear. There was nothing consensual about his assaults. What happens? He gets fined £100 in Carlisle Crown Court. One hundred smackers! Can you believe it?

'Now we get the "Spanner" boys engaging in undeniably horrific S&M practices – but they *were* consensual, they were carried out in private homes, there was no lasting physical damage done to anyone involved. Now maybe that's not the way *we* want to spend our Saturday evenings in but, fuck it, they got jail sentences for years! They're considered to be far worse than rapists, they're considered to be homosexual deviants – supposedly the worst trash in the world. I dunno, kid, this appeal's got me all wound up. I don't like what they did to each other but I hate the legal decisions we're seeing . . .'

Howard's uncharacteristic display of social anger made me consider further the consequences of Simone's extreme 'Bitch Of Pain' work. One of the prosecution's most graphic examples of the 'Spanner'-men's perversion was their tendency to use a blow-torch to heat a wire coat-hanger before branding one of the submissive group members. I wondered what the same prosecutors would make of an elegant academic translator's use of a more sophisticated branding technique. But, more than that, I dreaded the more personal impact such extended work was having on Simone herself.

It was much to my surprise, then, when Mandy clapped her hands delightedly in response to my concern about Simone. 'Amazing news!' she laughed. 'I forgot to tell you – she's broken up with Kyle! She's kicked him out the house, paintings and all! It's the best thing she could have done. I always said that that guy was more like a pimp than Jackson Pollock!'

When she confirmed that drastic change in her life, Simone also said to me that she was erasing her 'Bitch Of Pain' identity. 'It was too much for me to bear, *cherie*, all that pain. I have terrible hurt in my heart now because I am alone but at least I can look at myself in the mirror again. I am not burning people any longer, I am not pulling a stud through their penises any more. To do that I had to numb myself, to blank every scream that went through me. That was why I gave up my languages, that's why my tongue felt useless. What could I say about that work? But it was Kyle's silence in the end which made me stop. He never worried about me putting myself through all that for him. For a long while I tried to argue that that didn't matter. But it did. I did not know how he could stand to touch me when my own hands gave so much pain. I thought about telling him to leave for a long time but I didn't have the strength. I feared the loneliness too much.

'But so much has happened these last few months. When I heard about what had happened to you my blood went cold. I was shocked. But then Mandy said to me that was how she also felt when she thought of my own violence. That stopped me lying. She hit the centre of my heart. If I could shake at the thought of violence done to you, should I not shake at the thought of the pain I was paid to give every day? Kyle just shrugged when I said I wanted to stop S&M. He said we couldn't afford it. With the anger that ran through me then, I felt the return of some strength. I said that *I* could not afford the damage any longer. I told him to get out. He moved out the next day. He tries to call me sometimes but I will never see him again! It is over.'

'And what about prostitution?' I asked.

'Well, I am taking a break for a while. Just spending some time clearing the flat up, walking, sleeping with the cats and reading. I am going to do some translation again. But the prostitution itself wasn't the problem. It was just Kyle and the type of work I did under his horrible *Scream* painting. I am going to take on three of Mandy's clients to top up my income. But I am only going to do mild fantasy from now on. It's better for my heart.'

'Which three of Mandy's clients are you going to see?'

'I am taking three of the nicer men she knows. The sad old judge, the fruit artist and the foot-man whom I knew from when I first started with Mandy. You know them?'

'I know Chris, the man with the foot-fetish.'

'Aaah, of course, you spoke to him about our feet, Mandy's and mine . . .'

'Yeah, I quite liked him.'

'He is a very gentle and kind man. But tell me, *cherie*, what did he say about our feet to you?'

'He said something interesting about your feet – he said that they didn't dance enough, that they needed to dance for that's how feet spoke . . .'

'Mmmm! I think he was right. But, you know, I can dance again now, I *will* dance again – not only for him but for me . . .'

A different kind of dance had also resumed during this break-up. Although their commitment to each other had appeared to strengthen during the eighteen months I had known them, Sara Dale and David had been subjected to further persecution. The *News Of The World* had determined once again to lead their favourite 'Kinky Ms Whiplash' along the leash of yet another merry tabloid dance.

Ironically the *News Of The World* were pipped by *The People* to the scoop that Norman Lamont's post-Whiplash tenant was the ubiquitous Franzene Benveniste, an American 'dope-smoking stargazer'. Ms Benveniste, described as a

'psychological astrologer' on her business card, told *The People* that 'I'm not just American, I'm global . . .' Sara Dale, being more heavenly inclined, was always going to be a more provocative target than 'the tanned Franzene'.

Back in January, the *News Of The World*'s pursuit of Sara Dale had resumed in earnest. Whether it was an extension of their earlier story or, as I thought, just another device to boost newspaper sales, there was something sour behind that particular outbreak of sanctimonious tabloid fervour.

Despite receiving another mysterious warning from that other wayward American, 'Mr X', to stay out of the newspapers just a few days before, Sara Dale welcomed the urbane 'Mr Mohammed' when he arrived for his early evening appointment. 'As it was his first session,' Sara remembered, 'I tried to calm him. He was very agitated and excited. I suggested that an introductory £60 massage would be best instead of the full hour-long £90 version. "Let's go for the ninety," he insisted.

'He was so nervous that I spent forty-five minutes massaging his back, arms, legs and feet. All the time we talked, mostly about religion. He said he was Muslim and I told him about my mixed Christian and Jewish background and my Hindu inclination. We also spoke about our mutual shyness and his loneliness. I was moved by what he said.

'We then hugged. He went on and on about the fantastic experience I had just given him. Then he said he had to "come clean" with me. His uncle was Sheikh Hamadi al-Saud – an influential man in Saudi Arabia. He asked if I'd massage and "have sex" with his uncle. I explained why I didn't do intercourse and that my massage's stylisation of sex was perfectly appropriate between strangers. He accepted this and offered me £2,500 to spend the whole evening with his uncle.

'I called him at his suite at the Hilton the next morning after deciding to accept his invitation – although I told him his offer was exorbitant. Also, I said I'd be less nervous if my friend, Anne, could accompany me. But we'd only

accept £750, rather than £2,500 each to accompany his uncle to dinner and then on to the casino before his massage. He said this would be fine and that we would be with him between 7 and 4.30 a.m.

'A Mercedes stretch-limousine arrived to pick up Anne and I that evening. I felt relieved that I'd hired a special dress. This was obviously going to be a swanky affair. I told the chauffeur how privileged I'd feel to show the Sheikh the pleasure of massage.

'At the Hilton we were shown to the Sheikh's suite where we met Mohammed and his bodyguard. Mohammed was on an incredible power-trip – he kept flicking his fingers at the bodyguard to have his cigar lit or another drink poured. They asked if Anne and I'd do a show for them. I said that we could do some sort of stylised dance routine but I thought this would be absurd. They then said that the Sheikh was interested in spanking – I playfully replied that I'd only let Anne spank me because I felt completely safe with her. That was all a charade! Eventually we went down to the foyer to meet the Sheikh on our way to a restaurant.

'There was no sign of the Sheikh as we moved towards the Hilton's entrance. Suddenly someone shouted, "Oh look, there's Sara Dale!" A flashgun popped and there was instant turmoil. The bodyguard and the photographer disappeared behind a pillar. A few moments later the bodyguard came out triumphantly waving a roll of film. He was very apologetic – we'd have to leave. The Sheikh could not afford such publicity. He ushered Anne and me into the limousine which, ironically, had a flat battery. A friendly cabby had to give us a jump-start! All the way home the chauffeur said how sorry he was that our evening had been ruined.

'Mohammed called at two o'clock the following afternoon. He said he was making a "courtesy call" to let me know that he was a journalist from the *News Of The World*. They would be running his story on me the next morning. When I saw the story I didn't feel anger so much

as sorrow for this journalist – whose real name is Mazheer Mahmood. I thought how shy he'd been when I massaged him. I felt an overwhelming sadness for the man. What was this kind of muck-raking doing to him?'

I had wondered about such muck-raking myself, although being less charitable than Sara Dale, it had been in broader moral terms than in any personal anguish it might cause Mazheer Mahmood. I had already contacted him. During the course of some initially amicable telephone conversations, I discovered that Mr Mahmood's diplomatic response towards my interest in his newspaper's coverage of Sara Dale did not stretch to the point where he could slot me into his obviously crammed diary.

Eventually we settled on a telephone interview which lasted only a couple of questions. He must have expected some kind of conspiracy on my part against his journalistic reputation, which had been forged at *The Sunday Times*, and also on behalf of David Frost, for he quickly threatened a law-suit if I went, so to speak, below the belt. I was taken aback by his vitriol. After all, a more interesting facet of his brief encounter with Sara Dale was that she, supposedly the victim of a hatchet-job, spoke so sympathetically of him while he was so abrasive in remembering her – calling her a 'whore'.

'Oh dear,' murmured Sara Dale when I mentioned that truculent telephone conversation, 'but I liked him . . .'

We shared a chuckle at the thought that he had added another load to his burden by pulling the same trick a few consecutive weeks after his first Sheikh-cousin impersonation – including one particular occasion where he chose to waylay the Queen Mother's former jockey in a 'Sex With Starlets Naughty Date'.

'He must be a busy man,' mused Sara Dale. 'He's certainly brought the whole pack back on top of us again. We were auditioning actors for the videos we've just made the week after that latest scandal and we have to keep a constant watch for *Sun* reporters trying to sneak in. It was

like when the *News Of The World* sent reporters last September to act as bogus applicants for our couples' massage course! Even when they're out to destroy you the tabloids still seem ludicrous!

'But if I allowed them to warp my thinking I might as well pack up now! Whether or not it's a campaign against our sexual candour, I know there *are* people who want me to cave in. That's not going to happen even though they've caused us terrible hurt. You know it's taken me a long while to get over the Lamont trauma – but, with the release of the two videos we made for Virgin, I'll feel some vindication. The first depicts ways of giving pleasure to a man through massage while the second is devoted to pleasuring a woman. It'll be a breakthrough to sell sensual videos in places like WH Smith!'

That pervading mêlée between the *News Of The World* and her supposed 'Whiplash' persona ironically brought Sara Dale closer to her children and also encouraged her and David to write a *Career Prostitution* article which stripped the fuzzy ambiguities surrounding the edgy 'P' word with incisive clarity. The purple patches more familiar from her earlier *Taste Of Heaven* classic were replaced by words of crisper meaning:

> Some people still conceive of prostitution as a handful of poor, illiterate girls "sucked" into vice against their better judgment, living a life of shame and degradation, selling their undernourished bodies for use in intercourse or other, perverted practices. In real life, prostitutes sell verbal as much as sexual intercourse, sympathy as much as sex. And they are neither few in number nor, for the most part, victims. The nineteenth-century moralists' vision of unspeakable, forced exploitation and degradation may still be true in a minority of cases, but most women prostitute today because they choose to do so. Money, of course, particularly for the upbringing of their children, is often a powerful factor in making that choice . . . The idea of prostitution comprising a handful of girls is equally off the wall. Estimates vary up

to 220,000 women, if we take part-time, 'got to pay the gas-bill' amateurs into account, of which some 70,000 are full-time professionals. (This figure makes no allowance for male prostitutes who are thought by some researchers to be almost as numerous as the women.) In other words, there are about the same number of full-time female prostitutes as there are doctors, and they earn on average roughly the same amount. This makes prostitution a £2 billion profession.

After suggesting the introduction of 'training schemes for prostitutes', which I thought unlikely to tempt politicians as a way of reducing unemployment figures, her article went on to stress that:

The law, as it stands, says, 'Fine, yes, you are free to go ahead and prostitute. But if you do, watch out. Providing you ply your trade in the most demeaning and discouraging way, we won't do anything to interfere. But you can be sure we'll prosecute almost anything you try to do to make prostitution accessible, safe or pleasant – and it won't be just you that we prosecute but anyone else who gives you assistance.'

For instance, although it is perfectly legal for women to sell services for money, it is not legal for them to advertize or promote such services, nor to work together in the same place for safety and companionship. These are two of the main factors which drive women out on to the streets. What every prostitute wants is:

*A safe and comfortable place in which to work

*Protection from disease

*Freedom from police or other harassment

*Protection against non-payment

*Respect and confidentiality

Each of these five conditions, from a different perspective,

is a fundamental requirement of clients. They too want respect and confidentiality, a safe and comfortable place, no police or other harassment and no ripping off by the prostitute. In addition to these common requirements, prostitutes also want:

*Freedom from exploitation by pimps or agencies

*The support of colleagues and long-term acceptance by society

*Clients also want anonymity

'In my view these needs can be met effectively only by changing both the image and terms of business of the profession. By changing the image I mean formal training and qualifications. This will result in better educated, more caring and able people being attracted to the profession, and a higher proportion of prostitutes sufficiently sure of themselves not to need pimps and other forms of exploitative 'protection'.

'By changing the terms of business, I mean changing the law to allow girls to:

*Work together in the same place (in small groups of up to, say, five)

*Arrange proper protection (like alarm bells in the police station)

*Share their lives fully with their husbands or lovers without the latter being at risk of arrest for living on immoral earnings

*Market their services through licensed agencies on a regulated scale of fees and commissions

*Get mandatory, confidential medical checks and encouragement to form mutual support and self-help groups

What I would like to see is not serried ranks of state-regulated brothels but smaller self-regulating houses within

an overall framework of national supervision and local inspection.

The first step is for the government to set up a Royal Commission. Its members must include people who accept prostitution and believe that it has a useful social contribution to make. The commission must consult prostitutes, as well as politicians, medical, social and other authorities. The English Collective (Of Prostitutes) should propose a full self-regulatory approach not a million miles different from, say, FIMBRA. Then we can arrive at a new context for prostitution on the basis of which truly fundamental and valuable change will be made.

It seemed to me, as I read through that encapsulation of primary prostitution demands, that we had travelled a long way from the peaks and summits of pure sensual bliss extolled in *The Taste Of Heaven*. Despite the more ambiguous elements of a 'formal training' and 'national supervision' thesis and my doubts that her most urgent proposals would be implemented in the foreseeable future, I said to Sara that I admired the cogency of her argument. Between them, I added, the *News Of The World*'s and Alistair's respective attacks had diverted us from our more placid white South African perusal of supermarket tubs of hummus. We had been compelled to confront the public prejudices concealing the bleakest damage and darkness of current prostitution in Britain.

'I still think you should let me give you a healing massage after all that's happened to you,' Sara Dale replied before showing me the more maternal concern she felt whenever she thought of me crumbling under the cosh of Alistair's enthusiastic 'melonhead' gangs.

She insisted then, late as it was, on driving me home. When she parked her car outside my home, and after ascertaining that I felt all right being so close to the spot where I had made my acquaintance more than once with the cold street, she confirmed that she had visibly grown in confidence during the last year of tabloid abuse. 'In

a way I'm glad I've been forced out into the open – I feel free now to say whatever I like. After taking on Norman Lamont and the *News Of The World* I know I'm strong enough to continue my work. I'm unshackled from secrecy . . .'

In one of those curious ironies with which this story is suffused, two police vans suddenly turned the far corner and cruised slowly past Sara Dale's car. They were on their lookout for the bruised prostitutes, like Myra, Sarita and Leila's replacement, who walked the early morning beat stretching from Inverness Terrace and Westbourne Grove to Chepstow and All Saints Road. It felt like a tragic 'Prostitute Cell Block H' soap-opera time, at one in the morning. I thought of 'Tyson's' terrible batterings, the familiar faces, mysterious clients, repetitive arrests, early-morning court cases, futile fines and more terrible batterings from which Leila had just escaped.

Slipping down towards the tree where she had stood, two uniformed faces stared intently through the frosted windows at Sara Dale and me. We wondered then what the *News Of The World* would have made of that surreal moment if it had been saved in a photograph. 'Oh they would be crazy about it,' Sara sighed. ''Ms Whiplash and Kinky Pal arrested in sex-street!'' But I've escaped their clutches. There's nothing more they can do to me. Instead, they'll find themselves another ''West End Vice Queen'' and all the while they'll turn a blind eye to what's happening on these streets, every night. They'll turn away from the absurdity of the law and the violence suffered by the women out there – but, sweetheart, hasn't that always been their way . . .?'

As was her way, Alice wore ribbons in her hair as she knelt down on the floor and pored over Sara Dale's *Career Prostitution* words. 'Well, well, I once wasn't that sure about our Sara,' Alice murmured, 'but this gets close to the heart of it. She's one of ''us'' after all!'

'Which "us" are you talking about?' I asked distractedly as I tried to count her different polka-dot ribbons that sunny March afternoon. I had reached number three when she said, with some indignation, 'Why, us prostitutes in paradise of course!'

'Have you seen her *Taste Of Heaven* guide?' I asked as I spotted a fourth red and white bow in her hair.

'Uh-uh, I'm not interested in new-age sensuality courses! I'm just concerned about decriminalizing the angels of love!'

'Alice,' I asked finally, 'why are you wearing four different polka-dot ribbons today?'

'Because I'm an angel again,' she said dreamily.

'What do you mean?'

'I'm Alice-Angel again!' As I looked blankly back at her, she said more evenly, 'I'm going back to prostitution.'

I was more surprised than shocked by her sudden announcement. 'When did you decide this?' I asked in a voice which attempted to match her own modulation.

'Oh, I've been thinking about it for a long time. That day when we were with Mandy in her basement made me realize how much I'd missed the work. I gave a lot of pleasure and I had a lot of fun too when I used my bendy whips and mirrors. And *that's* what I miss.'

'What about your job and your boyfriend?'

'Well,' she said cryptically at first, 'I'm keeping the day job. I'm gonna do a little night-time hooking. I'm only taking on four of Mandy's old clients. That's all I need to keep my hand in . . .'

'Not Alistair I hope!'

'Never! I'll leave him to Rachel. She's now "The Violator Angel" after all; she's gonna wrap him up good. He's not my sort of bag anyway. I'm only going in for the slap and tickle side of S&M, the prancing around and the sound of the bendy whip. I'm going to work Monday to Thursday nights – an hour each night. I'm doing it on my terms, out of free choice – which is the only way to do it . . .'

'And what about your boyfriend?'

'He was really sweet actually. He definitely wasn't a bastard like Kyle. But . . . there's always a "but", I guess. I felt like branching out on my own for a while. I knew he would never want me to do even mild prostitution. I love him for that. But I broke up with him at the weekend. It was painful but I feel happier now, lighter, more free. I'm looking forward to being Alice in the mirror again.'

'It seems strange,' I said.

'What does?'

'The fact that when I met you you weren't working as a prostitute. That you introduced me to Mandy and even to the "Enema Lady" . . . and now you're going back just as I end writing this book and just as Mandy starts her last week . . .'

'Yeah, "The Terminator Angel's" slipping away now. I think she had a lot to do with me deciding to go back. She's done it now, you know, her five-year experiment. It still seems a crazy way to get into prostitution. But it was her way and she made it work, even though she was unlucky enough to get entangled with someone as extreme as Alistair. But if she gets through their last session intact, she's won that struggle. And she's won it not just for herself but for all of us. He couldn't control "The Terminator Angel", he couldn't make her stay longer than she planned.

'Women like her and Rachel are unbelievably strong. They've inspired me a lot this last year. You know how bad that guy is, you know how powerful he is but I saw him in town the other day. He looks all broken-up, defeated even. Now I know he may come back to his full fury and I also know that he's anything but a one-off. There are other Alistairs out there. Men who spell trouble for women. And women have to start paying their dues to prostitutes because it's us whores who see men stripped of all pretence. We see them being both weak and angry. We see them flaws and all. We're not in awe of them. We know them. We take on all their rage and their hang-ups and we control them. And other women, all feminist

women, should turn to us and hear us talk because we've seen and felt so much.

'And that's also why I am going back. It's not just for the money or the giggles – it's because I know that the struggle is not yet through. I'm going to take an active part in a campaign for the decriminalization of prostitution. It's the only way forward. Prostitutes' rights are central to women's rights. We need legal places to work in, safe places, clean places, fun places, *our* places. But to be the most effective kind of activist for these changes you've got to be at the heart of it. You've got to be working as an angel of love yourself. Mandy Kavanagh won a smaller struggle for us, some cruel personal struggle. It's my turn to take her place now and I'm ready, I'm hungry to get going again, my honey . . .'

'Do you think Mandy will also follow you back into prostitution one day?'

'No. That's the one thing I am certain of. She's different to me in that way. I never plan my life so rigidly. I never said I was finished with prostitution forever. I took a break. I always knew I would go back. She won't. It's not in her nature. It's like if you asked if I thought she would take heroin again. She's done that. She's finished with it. She moves on. Once she gets through that last time with Alistair, which I hope she does completely unscathed, then I know that "The Terminator Angel" is through. She will become someone different then. Just as strange, just as special, but different. You can count on that as surely, baby, as the ribbons in my hair . . .'

When her last day came, "The Terminator Angel" woke early, as she had done five years before on the morning she first worked as a prostitute. As then, she waited for the hours to drag past. When there were, at last, less than thirty minutes left before the hour hand on her wrist reached three, she climbed the stairs once more and walked into her blue room. There, she sat on the sill of the big bay window and

looked out at a day which was a curious mix of sunshine, wind and scudding white cloud.

Mandy Kavanagh thought of all the feelings which had flooded through her in the weeks building up towards that day. When the violence Alistair needed done to himself had begun to spill out of her basement and into the backrooms and streets she considered ending 'The Terminator Angel's' experiment months before that scheduled close. She had been filled with a harrowing despair that her own personal examination of will had spiralled crazily, and so dangerously, into the lives of others. But that Chinatown image of Jackie, of her being assaulted by Alistair, had driven her through those most arduous Tuesdays. As convinced as she was that Alistair's attack had been an aberration, that he was sucked too far down into fear of women and loathing of self to break out of his masochistic demand to soak up a prostitute's punishment, she felt compelled to see her time through with him as if it were a prison sentence.

If she could ensure that he did not receive what he most desired when the final 'Terminator Angel' crunch-time came, Mandy felt sure that he would learn a bitter lesson; that his control over her, over women, had ended no matter how much money he imagined he could throw around. She felt a tightening spasm of fear for she could not be certain how he would react when that moment had to be faced. What if she had been wrong and his desperation turned to destruction?

That uncertainty cast the most oppressive pall over the funereal pace of the day. Then it escalated frighteningly when the second hand moved towards two minutes and then one minute to three o'clock. She wondered helplessly if he had already moved on from her to wreak havoc in a far more damaging 'tryst of pain' with someone who, instead of him, would play the part of flagellated victim. With still no sign of him she went to the phone and pushed the buttons marked 'one, two, three' to check that she hadn't lost track of time.

At the third stroke, as the Speaking Clock confirmed, the Accurist-sponsored time was 'three three and thirty seconds . . .'

But, by the time she had returned the automated clock to its cradle, he had turned the far corner. She saw him when he was nearly halfway down the street, not more than a few houses from her own. He saw her looking down at him and the next thing she heard was the sound of the buzzer on her front door. He pressed it only once and, strangely, she did not dally this last time. She walked past her still rocker and out of her blue room, down the coral staircase and along the wide hall where the familiar photographs were still hanging.

Alistair did not have time to ring again. She opened the door and ushered him in before he had had sufficient time to prime himself for whatever lay ahead. She led him silently to the cream room and then watched him hover uneasily around the edge of the bed. He did not begin to undress himself as he had always done before but, eventually, asked her a short question: 'So, is this it?'

'Yes, this is it,' she replied.

'Are you sure?'

'What do you think?'

He was quiet then and so she began to talk in that room where she had been inert for so long while he had regaled her with the shabbiest of his fantasies, with all his stories of power and revenge, lust and revulsion. He sank back against the bed while she told him what he had always known. Everything which he had harboured so darkly in that house had to end. There was no point even in delaying that moment for another week. Whether it disappointed or relieved him she had abandoned her earlier plan. She had once wondered if she should use that ultimate session to beat everything from him, even if it meant she had to come close to killing him. But, instead, she had resolved to make him accountable for his actions in a setting where he could not lose himself in his dead butterfly way. She cared not for him

but about the consequences of what he had already done and might still do to others. She had thought of calling in the police and the media, and that was an alternative towards which she could yet turn. Yet she knew that, above all else, he needed help.

Mandy was just beginning to hit her highest gear of authority when he cracked. Instead of raging at her and tearing the clothes from his body before picking up his minted 'everywhore, everywhore' mantra, Alistair started to cry. She would have been moved if it had been any other man but, with him, she wondered if it was not a trick. She hardly stirred, only leaning back slightly against the cupboard in her customary position, her words lost in the sound of his tears. The crying went on and on, until it picked up a racking rhythm of sobs.

Where she had been expecting catharsis at that moment, Mandy felt only the swirl of melodrama. He was not acting as he cried but, still, she could only watch him as the minutes passed and their last 'Terminator Angel' session tailed off into snivelling bathos. With a tear-streaked face he at last spoke. He knew she was right, she had always been right. He was sick, he was damaged. He needed help if he was not going to buy a gun so that he could bury it deep into the back of his mouth before blowing away the top of his head. He had told his wife how bad he felt inside, he had told her he had cheated and mistreated her for too long. He had asked his wife to hold on one last time while they found if he could be helped. He was seeing a doctor; there was a card, he said to Mandy, with his doctor's name and number. He was not lying. Mandy should check up on him, she could call the psychiatrist so that she could confirm that truth, so that she could tell others how far he, Alistair, had sunk.

Mandy chose to say nothing in reply, waiting to see if another twist unfurled before her disbelieving eyes. But as the minutes passed he merely began to gather himself together. He blew his nose, wiped his eyes and said 'sorry'

as he passed the doctor's card to her with the same hand that had just run across his face. She took the card but backed away from him as he pulled out the notes of money. 'Please take it,' he pleaded as she turned away with a shake of her head. 'I'll leave it here,' he gestured towards the bed.

'Take the money, I don't want it,' she said, looking him straight in the face.

'Please, it's yours . . .' He placed the ten crisp £20 notes on the edge of the bed and, as if suddenly desperate to leave, said, 'I'd better leave you in peace then . . .' Mandy scooped up the money and passed it back to him but he let the notes fall to the ground, saying all the while, 'Please, please, take it . . .'

He turned away just as suddenly and she followed him down the hall, much as she had done when they had made their way to the cellar so many times before. But then there seemed no words left in him and he slipped silently away. She watched him walk down the street, wondering whether she should feel pity or elation. She felt neither. Even if she were no longer 'The Terminator Angel', even if she had seen him leave her house for the last time, he was still moving out there, walking more briskly with each lengthening step. As he reached the corner she saw him look again at his watch, gauging how much time he had to compose himself before his next appointment.

A month later, the blown-up Polaroid print of Mandy Kavanagh turning twenty no longer hung in her hallway. In its place there was a different photograph. It had been taken by Lee Docherty in the late afternoon of the day she had last seen Alistair. Being a Docherty photograph, it was black and white and shot at a strange angle. Although more used to taking street photographs, Docherty had eclipsed his previous work with that print of Mandy curled up on her blue room rocker. I remembered the three of us spending that afternoon together and, also, all the hours we had shared since meeting eighteen months before. Perhaps those

links shaped my perception, yet it seemed that Docherty had captured everything she had felt that day.

Although the room was shadowed with fading light and her hair curved around her face, shading its one side, she was laughing, her expression lit with the release of pleasure and humour. Mandy's laughter fell mostly at the expense of Docherty and me. Docherty, because he exuded the veneer of the hardened professionals who used to photograph her for glossy magazine spreads, by shooting spools of film and murmuring subtle commands as he had never done in the dingy streets of King's Cross, and me, because I was the only one getting steadily drunk on the celebratory magnum of champagne she had bought the day before to share with us.

The longer I looked at Docherty's photograph the more I thought of all the others hanging in the imagined hallway of this book. I thought of Alice and her mirrors and of Simone, free from Kyle. I thought of Rachel Hathaway who had the more severe task of curbing the animosity which Alistair had brought to bear on both Mandy and Jackie. And it was then that I wondered once more about her dream of Morocco and Colin Dugmore's of serenity. I found it hard to imagine what had happened to them since they disappeared so abruptly. But, looking at that photograph of laughter, I also began to think happier thoughts – of Leila and Marina Studzinski having escaped their familiarity with violence, of Howard Lambert, Michel and Matti McLean proving to me that there were also compassionate entrepreneurs and consumers in the business of sex; and lastly, that, despite their convoluted reinventions of self, both Mandy Kavanagh and Lee Docherty were happier than I had ever known them.

Since shedding her 'Terminator Angel' persona, Mandy had spent most of those weeks at home, dismantling her cellar of pain and interviewing prospective tenants who wanted to rent her house for a year while she spent time in Paris and New York. Yet, as befitting her move away

from self-absorption, she also saw much of Simone and Alice – thereby ensuring that their takeover of her client list passed smoothly. She also agreed to return to the formal interview track with me so that her own personalized experiences in prostitution could be set against the more stringent demands placed on women in the streets and constricting rooms.

Ironically, it was difficult for me to convince her that her own state of mind and future were pertinent to such an interview. She, instead, wanted to launch into that recurring cry for the decriminalization of prostitution. But, after a while, she did relent sufficiently to say, 'Well, you can see for yourself. I'm doing pretty well. I'm doing things that I'd stopped doing for most of the last six months. I became terribly worn down – not so much by the prostitution itself but by every dark thing which poured from Alistair on to Jackie and you and me. But I'm feeling happy and relaxed again. I'm seeing my friends, I'm going to lots of movies and plays and galleries, I'm reading, I'm listening to music, I'm planning this crazily long holiday. I've decided to spend the spring and summer in Paris where Simone's just found this great apartment near Nôtre Dame for me. It's owned by this doddery old sweetie who's Simone's long-lost great-aunt or something. I just want to walk about that city and look at the buildings and the people and have a good time. Then, when it turns colder, I'm going to stay with my sister and her husband in New York. Right now that's a daunting thought. But maybe it's time I bend a little their way and stretch a hand out to my family again – well, to my sister at least. But I really like New York so I'm sure things will turn out fine there too . . .'

'But what's gonna happen when "The Terminator Angel" hits America . . .?'

'You think that spells trouble?' she said with a light laugh.

'Well, America might crank up another self-mythology. You know, "only in America" can you do something even

stranger and larger than life than what you did here, first as a junkie and then as a prostitute . . .'

'No, I'm through with that stuff now. I even blush a little and wonder at the strangeness myself now. I wondered the other day what you must *really* have thought when you first came here and when you heard about "The Terminator Angel" . . .'

'But what about my meeting Robert in all his leather-bound glory?'

'Yeah, I haven't seen *Surf Butt Bandits* for nearly five weeks now. Alice is bang into it right now . . .'

'Do you think you'll miss it?'

'What? *Surf Butt Bandits*?' she laughed.

'No, not that!'

'Well, I will miss talking about "Gregor Samsa" . . .'

'I was thinking more of prostitution . . .'

'No, I won't miss it,' she said after a briefly troubled pause.

'Does that mean you regret those five years?'

'No. I don't want to get too self-righteous again but I don't regret anything I did. The last year was very hard, especially those final months. But I'm really glad that I was a prostitute. I have some economic freedom now. And I learnt more about myself and about other people in those five years than I would have done in any other situation.'

'How do those five years seem to you now – with hindsight?'

'The first four years were very controlled. That was so important to me then – control. I had to be strong. I couldn't let even a chink of frailty slip to the clients. That, of course, was the ultimate sign of my own fear, my own recognition that the odds are laid so heavily against not only prostitutes but all women. You know, I used to draw this analogy between my junkie and my whoring days. But that was wrong. The first was a ridiculous, post-adolescent thing. But becoming a prostitute was less a twisted personal whim than a desperate response to the adversity a woman faces

on her own. You know, then, before I was "The Terminator Angel", I was just sick of being pawed by men, I was sick of them thinking that they could buy me, that they could own me, that they could control me. I thought, well, if that's the way it is then they're gonna really have to pay me.

'The fact that I came out of modelling, which sometimes is just prostitution in its most refined form, had a lot to do with me going to this extreme. And I was desperate too to find some economic stability for myself. I was frightened, I guess, of being a woman alone, of being poor, of feeling that I had to "have" a man in order to be "safe". I found all those things hard to bear so I thought that if there has to be adversity then let me face it, let me try to control it. And I did that for four years. It was only when things began to spin out of my control, when I began to worry about so many other people, that I became a real person again. It was hard to think about all the violence and abuse – about what Alistair personifies and about the fate of women as different as Simone and Jackie . . .'

'So, in a way, you feel less isolated now. You share something with Simone and Jackie, which perhaps you didn't feel when you started out with your own personal "experiment" . . .'

'That's the biggest change. What I thought was a deeply personal act came out of, in reality, a much deeper public consequence. Five years ago I was all into the post-feminist groove. You remember even eighteen months ago, us going on about Madonna. "Yeah, Madonna's fucking great", I kept saying. She'd proved that the "struggle" had already been won. Women could be strong, women could be in control. Yeah, that happens sometimes but I was conning myself into thinking that we could claim to be "post" feminist. Okay, maybe women are better off in the 1990s than they were in the 1950s – but by how much? We can get to work in some jobs and wear lipstick again! But the old problems haven't gone away – they've just been given this gloss of ambiguity by these magazine articles asking,

"Can women have it all?" Fuck, most women just want to have some semblance of real choice. I felt, rightly or wrongly, that my most pragmatic choice eventually narrowed down to prostitution. And as more and more women like me – Simone, Alice, Rachel – make that same choice the indictment is not against them but against this society . . .'

'So what does that make you feel about prostitution?'

'That it's here to stay. That it is becoming more and more rife. That the laws which criminalize it are an outrage. That I was luckier than any other prostitute I know. That the prostitutes I've met are among the most courageous, creative and resilient people I have ever known. That I'm amazed by what women in the sex industry endure. I'm amazed not only that they withstand it with grace but that the injustice just grinds on and so many people try to turn a blind eye to it. I've learnt that it covers every facet of society – every class and every corner, every type of sensibility and sexuality. I think that women like Alice and Sara Dale often really do help people and so it's not the act of prostitution that's the bad thing. Rather it's the circumstances surrounding prostitution which are so hard to bear. And as it *is* here to stay – as everyone already knows – the laws around it should be changed. That's the most urgent issue in prostitution – changing the law.'

'And, going back to the more personal, what's happened to Alistair?'

'I saw Rachel the other day. He hardly even goes to see her these days. She said he's in a really bad way. He still seems on the verge of a nervous breakdown. I spoke to this psychoanalyst he's seeing. I think he is still a little bewildered by what he's heard but I know that he is still seeing Alistair twice a week.'

'But what happens if Alistair stops seeing him?'

'I don't know. I think about that often. It taints my pleasure in having finished with "The Terminator Angel". I can't say for sure that his current dejection is just a phase.

Maybe he'll go back to what he was, once he gets over the turmoil of these last months.'

'How do you feel about Alistair now?'

'I hate him sometimes. But, most of all, I really do think he is diseased. I could never trust a man like that. He has fooled so many people for so long in his "rise to the top". He can keep on doing it again and again. I also used to think that it was just me against Alistair. But it's not. You should hear some of the stories I've heard from Rachel. Alistair's just a representative of so many others. We just happened to bump into him. So I can never feel blasé about prostitution even if Alistair never harms another person in his life. How many more other Alistairs are out there . . .?'

'So does it bother you that friends like Simone and Alice have gone back to prostitution?"

'I'm more bothered by the fate of the Jackies and the Leilas. Simone's gonna be fine now that she's sent Kyle away. She'll be OK as long as she starts using her languages again and she's already doing that. Anyway, the clients she now sees, clients like Chris, the *Red Shoes* man, are gentle and kind. As for Alice, well Alice is extraordinary. It's women like Alice who will bring about change. I love her she makes me laugh and she makes me draw my breath in admiration at the same time. . .'

We looked at another Docherty photograph then – this time of Alice Teague, resplendent in her thigh-length boots, leather jacket and yellow ribbons. It was one of Docherty's first-ever colour photographs and, like that of Mandy, it showed Alice laughing – this time in front of a blurred, elongated mirror.

As she stared at the print, which Docherty had asked me to pass on to Mandy, she said, 'Alice looks radiant, doesn't she? What's happening to our friend Docherty? He's starting to take different kinds of photographs now. This isn't exactly bleak King's Cross stuff any more. Don't tell me he's moved in with young Kitty in Knightsbridge, that loud old lady who always calls him "gigolo"?'

'No, he's still in the same flat. But he's taken down all his old photographs.'

'He hasn't stuck me and Alice to his walls now, has he?'

'No, he's started to take and frame photographs of buildings instead.'

'Is he happier then?'

'I think so – he's going to work for another year or two as a prostitute . . .'

'And then?'

'He'll still be taking photographs . . .'

'I love this one, of Alice.'

'He's even started to name his photographs.'

'What does he call this one?'

'Look at the back, you'll see.'

Mandy Kavanagh, resolved at last that she was no longer 'The Terminator Angel', picked up the print and slowly turned it over. When she saw the three words in bold black type, she smiled and said, 'Of course, what else could he call it? That's my Alice - the "Angel Of Love" . . .'

KATE MUIR

ARMS AND THE WOMAN

'She is wearing his trousers. They are khaki. Worse still, she is driving his tank. In the dust, crushed under its tracks, lies what remains of his machismo. The woman soldier has invaded the last place where the warrior could celebrate his masculinity in safety, and debagged him.'

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HODDER AND STOUGHTON PAPERBACKS

ANTHONY SAMPSON

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Tribune

HODDER AND STOUGHTON PAPERBACKS

Mandy, the Terminator Angel.
Leather-clad purveyor of very special services.

Simone, the Bitch of Pain in her sound-proofed cellar.

Jackie, the £15 Chinatown whore.
Vicki, the £1-a-peep Soho stripper.
Tim, the slinky Madonna transvestite.
Nameless, underage, and homeless boys at King's Cross.

And Sara Dale, aka Miss Whiplash, sex therapist and former tenant of Norman Lamont.

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